



# NETAJI

SUBHAS CHANDRA BOSE'S  
Life, Politics & Struggle

Featuring  
95 photos from  
family albums &  
Netaji Research  
Bureau archives

## KRISHNA BOSE

Edited and Translated by  
SUMANTRA BOSE

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PICADOR INDIA

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## Introduction

When Krishna Chaudhuri married Sisir Kumar Bose in December 1955, just before her twenty-fifth birthday, she had little detailed knowledge of Subhas Chandra Bose, his life and his struggle for India's freedom. Like countless Indians, she was simply in awe of his legendary heroism.

Growing up in Calcutta in the 1940s, Krishna was deeply imprinted by the tumultuous events which she – a sensitive, bookish and somewhat lonely only child – witnessed year after year. It started with the Quit India movement of August 1942 and its brutal suppression. A year later, she watched columns of emaciated, starving people from Bengal's villages staggering on Calcutta's roads from the windows of her parents' third-floor apartment on south Calcutta's relatively affluent Rashbehari Avenue, begging for morsels of food, as the Bengal Famine of 1943–44 unfolded. On 26 December 1943, Krishna turned thirteen around the peak of this holocaust by hunger, which killed four million of Bengal's sixty million people.

World War II played out in the background. From April to July of 1943, Krishna and her mother were among tens of thousands of upper-middle-class Calcuttans who self-evacuated the city – in Krishna's case to her family's holiday home in Mihijam, a place in the Santhal Parganas (present-day Jharkhand) just beyond the Bengal border – as rumours spread that the Japanese, poised on the Burma–India frontier since mid-1942, were going to heavily bomb Calcutta from the air. The panic proved misplaced. And unknown to Krishna and most other Indians, it was during that time, in mid-1943, that Subhas Chandra Bose arrived in Southeast Asia after a perilous voyage by submarine from northern Europe and launched the final war of Indian independence.

In August 1946, Krishna witnessed the savagery of the 'Great Calcutta Killings' when an inferno of communal violence engulfed the city and thousands of its people, Muslim and Hindu, met brutal deaths. A year later, in August 1947, she happened to be visiting Delhi at the moment of independence, and partition. She listened to Nehru's midnight 'tryst with destiny' speech on the radio. She and her two male cousins were on the streets of Delhi all day on 15 August, soaking up the ceremonies and the euphoric celebrations until the evening.

Then within days, communal carnage erupted and Delhi was put under curfew – Krishna remembers that one spell of curfew lasted eighty-four hours. A Sikh neighbour who had taken a tonga (horse-cart, the taxis of Delhi then) was stabbed in the stomach by the Muslim tonga driver, who then fled. The Sikh took off his turban, used it to bandage the wound, and drove the tonga home himself. He died after a few days. One day, Krishna and her two male cousins, aged fourteen and twelve,



ventured out on their bicycles and entered a riot-hit area – they fled home on a tonga after patrolling soldiers intercepted them.

Then in mid-September, Krishna and her mother returned to Calcutta by train. It was a hair-raising journey. The Old Delhi railway station was littered with corpses and the stench was dreadful. As the train crossed the bridge over the Jamuna river, Krishna observed that the shallow waters were strewn with bodies. Soon, a gang which included several Sikhs started moving through the train, murdering any Muslims they found and throwing their bodies out. When the gang entered Krishna's compartment and learned that she and her mother were Bengali, they took the mother and daughter to be Muslim – since they believed most of Bengal had gone to Pakistan – and wanted to kill them too. Krishna, then sixteen, and her mother were saved by the intervention of a Sikh refugee girl about Krishna's age who happened to be travelling in their compartment. The girl was the only survivor of a large Sikh family slaughtered in the Lahore district. The orphaned girl spoke sternly to the gang's Sikh members in Punjabi and saw them off. When the train reached Kanpur, British 'Tommies' (soldiers) boarded it and apprehended the gang.

Krishna Bose has written vividly about all these events, and much else besides, in her memoir and autobiography of her early life, *Lost Addresses: A Memoir of India, 1934-1955*. In *Lost Addresses*, she writes that '... leafing through its pages, I am a bit surprised by one thing. The diary of an ordinary Indian girl in her early to middle teens contains hardly anything of a personal nature. Instead, it's filled with references to the tumultuous events sweeping India on the eve of independence.'

Not all of those events are about violence, horror and misery. There is one entirely different, uplifting episode which unfolded in late 1945 and early 1946. That was the time when tens of thousands of the Indian National Army's soldiers were repatriated as prisoners of war by the British from Southeast Asia to India and word of the INA – suppressed by the British propaganda machine during the war – spread like wildfire across the subcontinent. The British decision to put three INA officers – Shah Nawaz Khan, Prem Kumar Sahgal and Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon – on trial in Delhi's Red Fort on charges of treason ('waging war on the King Emperor') triggered a mass uprising across India in solidarity with the INA, in which hundreds were shot dead in Bombay and Calcutta alone. The demonstrations throughout India in solidarity with the INA cut across deep – and deepening – religious and political divides. This was followed in February 1946 by the revolt of Indian sailors of the Royal Indian Navy, which began in Bombay and spread to Karachi and Calcutta. There were rumblings of revolt in the British-Indian army, and in the air force. It rang the death knell of the Raj. The British read the writing on the wall and the final countdown to their shambolic exit from the subcontinent began.



Krishna Bose writes in *Lost Addresses*: 'The INA fever gripping the nation touched our lives as well. In Hindustan Park in our south Calcutta neighbourhood, girls marched in military formation, me among them. We paraded to *Kadam Kadam Badhaye Ja*, the INA's catchy marching song. Our role models were the teenaged girls and young women who had joined the INA's women's force, the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, and especially its striking-looking and charismatic commander, Captain Lakshmi Swaminathan – Lakshmi Sahgal after her marriage in 1947 to Colonel Prem Sahgal.' This was around the time Krishna turned fifteen on 26 December 1945.

Subhas Chandra Bose's forty-ninth birthday on 23 January 1946 was the occasion of massive celebration and commemoration throughout the still-undivided subcontinent. 'In Calcutta,' Krishna Bose writes in *Lost Addresses*, '... we woke up in the morning to the sound of music. *Prabhat Pheris*, processions taken out shortly after daybreak, meandered through the streets of our neighbourhood and every other neighbourhood of the city, singing patriotic songs in chorus. We were still a colony, craving freedom. As the marchers walked and sang, they were showered with flowers from houses on both sides of the street. I looked out of our windows at the sight – a thick spray of flowers enveloping the marching men, women and children. The roof of every house proudly flew the national tricolour [the Congress flag with the *charkha* in the centre, adopted by the INA and the Provisional Government of Free India declared by Netaji in Singapore in October 1943].' Then 'just after noon, the approximate time of Netaji's birth on 23 January 1897, the neighbourhood reverberated with the sound of conch shells. I hadn't collected flowers in advance so missed out in the morning but now I made up for it, blowing as hard as I could on a conch shell.' 'In the late afternoon,' Krishna writes, 'we went to rallies at Deshapriya Park and Triangular Park' in south Calcutta and 'I listened to speeches by the INA veterans Colonel Cyril John Stracey and Colonel P. Thimayya.' Then 'a mammoth procession wound its way from Deshapriya Park to Deshbandhu Park in north Calcutta.'

Krishna's future husband, Sisir Bose, had been released from prison in the Punjab just four months earlier, in September 1945. Sisir Bose has written in the memoir and autobiography of his early life, *Subhas and Sarat: An Intimate Memoir of the Bose Brothers* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2016): 'On Uncle Subhas's forty-ninth birthday, 23 January 1946, there was a mammoth demonstration in Calcutta. The procession, led by the INA hero Shah Nawaz Khan, traversed the city from Deshapriya Park in the south to Deshbandhu Park in the north. It seemed as if the whole of Calcutta was on the streets. I joined the throngs and walked the entire distance.'



'On 23 January 1947,' Krishna Bose writes in *Lost Addresses*, 'Netaji's fiftieth birthday was celebrated on a huge scale all over the country. In the evening it was as if Diwali, the festival of lights, had moved to January. Houses across Calcutta were decorated with candle-lamps in commemoration of the absent leader. Many INA officers – all household names – came to the city to participate in the celebrations. They were mobbed wherever they went, especially by young people.'

Yet by January 1947, the leader's absence was being keenly felt as India moved in the direction of partition. In Bengal, the atmosphere had turned toxic after the Calcutta riots of August 1946, aggravated by the brutal attacks on Hindus in the Noakhali and Tipperah districts of eastern Bengal in October, which in turn sparked gory violence against Muslims in parts of Bihar.

Sisir Bose and Krishna Chaudhuri met for the first time in August 1955 at Trinca's, a tearoom on Calcutta's Park Street which exists to this day as a bar and restaurant. The previous month, Krishna had begun her forty-year career as a teacher of English literature at Calcutta's City College (South) for women, a job from which she retired at the end of 1995 and then joined active politics, to be elected as a Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) for three consecutive terms from Greater Kolkata's Jadavpur constituency. The meeting at Trinca's was artfully arranged (and chaperoned). Krishna was unaware of its purpose and was annoyed when she realized that she had been set up. Nonetheless, she agreed to the marriage proposal, and Sisir and Krishna were married on 9 December 1955, forty-five years to the day after Sisir's parents – Bivabati Dey and Sarat Chandra Bose, the famous barrister and nationalist leader who was his younger brother Subhas's lifelong confidant and supporter – were married on 9 December 1910.

In the four months between the introduction and the wedding, Sisir and Krishna met many times, always in chaperoned environments. The meeting she remembers most of all took place in the autumn of 1955 at the house on Calcutta's Creek Row of her paternal uncle, Dr Khirode Chandra (K. C.) Chaudhuri, India's pioneering paediatrician. Sisir, a graduate of Calcutta's Medical College who had then taken advanced training in paediatrics in London (the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children), Sheffield, Bern (Switzerland) and Vienna, was at the time working with Dr K. C. Chaudhuri to set up the Institute of Child Health, India's first teaching hospital dedicated to the welfare of infants and children, which thrives to this day in the city's Park Circus area.

Krishna writes in *Lost Addresses*: 'I had noticed that Sisir had a reserved personality, and spoke little. As we sat on the south-facing verandah of the Creek Row house after dinner one night, he surprised me by opening up. That night I learned about a side of his life that had been completely unknown to me. I had thought I was



marrying a smart young doctor who was embarking, like me, on a professional career after completing his advanced training in Britain and continental Europe. That night I learned of his central role in Netaji's historic escape from India in 1941, when Sisir had helped plan the escape and driven his uncle at the dead of night from the Bose family house on Calcutta's Elgin Road to the Gomoh railway junction in Bihar (now in Jharkhand). I learned of his daring underground activities on behalf of Netaji from 1941 to 1944, which led to his arrest and imprisonment first in the Red Fort in Delhi and then for a much longer period in solitary confinement at the Lahore Fort. I had had no idea that my husband-to-be had such an interesting past.'

Krishna continues: 'That past shaped our life together for decades, for 45 years until Sisir's death on 30 September 2000. Sisir had been very deeply influenced by his association with Netaji's struggle for India's freedom. It rapidly became clear to me that my husband's life was charged by a commitment to preserve Netaji's memory, and the legacy of his life and struggle, for the people and the future generations of India. I decided early on to help and support him in this endeavour ... in the process, I discovered that Subhas Chandra Bose is much more than a romantic hero, or a swashbuckling action-figure.'

This volume is the result of that journey of discovery Krishna Bose undertook in partnership with her husband. As the journey progressed, Krishna Bose emerged as one of the world's foremost authorities on Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's multifaceted life and his epic struggles in the cause of India's freedom. She became a pioneer of serious research on Netaji's life and struggles, and published seminal books and articles on the topic.

Krishna wrote mostly in Bengali, however, and until now her work on Netaji has not been available in English. Her first book, *Itihaser Sandhane* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1972) is the seminal work on Netaji's activities in Europe from 1933 to 1936, and again from 1941 to 1943. *Itihaser Sandhane* (In Search of History) is built around her narrative of a trip she and Sisir made to Europe in 1971, during which they visited West and East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Austria, England and Switzerland, met with Netaji's old associates and the new generation of historians, researched in libraries and archives and spoke at conferences in Prague and Bonn.

Krishna's second book, *Charanarekha Taba* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1982) is the seminal work on the climactic phase of Netaji's life as the leader of the Azad Hind movement in Southeast Asia from 1943 to 1945. *Charanarekha Taba* (In Your Footsteps) is built around her narrative of a trip she and Sisir made to Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand in 1979, during which they met with Netaji's old associates, scholars, and leading members of the Indian-origin communities of



these countries including many participants in the struggle that was waged under Netaji's leadership from 1943 to 1945.

It is a pity that *Itihaser Sandhane* and *Charanarekha Taba* – both trail-blazing works – were not translated into English. However, Krishna Bose also published numerous original and important articles on Netaji's life and his struggle for India's freedom – mostly in Bengali, but several in English as well – between the early 1960s and the early 1990s. The Bengali articles were brought together as a book titled *Prasanga Subhaschandra* (About Subhaschandra), published by Ananda Publishers, Kolkata in 1993. Most of the eighteen articles that make up the present volume are English translations (by Sumantra Bose) of the Bengali articles she wrote and published between the 1960s and the 1990s. In addition, the few articles she wrote in English have been included, and the final article ('Netaji's Last Journey: The Taipei Tragedy') is the English version, translated by Sumantra Bose, of an article she wrote in Bengali in 2017.

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In 1957, Sisir Bose established the Netaji Research Bureau (NRB) at Netaji Bhawan, the Bose ancestral house on Calcutta's Elgin Road. The imposing three-storeyed mansion at 38/2 Elgin Road (now Lala Lajpat Rai Sarani) had been built in 1909 by Janakinath Bose, Sarat and Subhas's father and Sisir's grandfather. It was from this house that Netaji escaped in January 1941, aided by his twenty-year-old nephew Sisir. In 1946, Sarat Bose declared that the house would no longer be used for residential or any other private purposes and dedicated it to the nation as 'Netaji Bhawan', where Subhas's memory would be preserved and from where his political and ideological legacy would be propagated. But Sarat passed away prematurely in 1950, aged just sixty, and nothing much happened to take the mission forward – until Sisir established the NRB there in 1957.

Sisir Bose founded NRB almost silently, with no fanfare and little publicity. The mission Sisir set for NRB was nothing if not ambitious – to systematically research and comprehensively document Netaji's life in all its vastness and complexity. A challenging agenda indeed, in part because Netaji's life story is spread across the world: the Indian subcontinent, Europe, and East and Southeast Asia. Undaunted, Sisir embarked purposefully on the task of making contact with all those who had worked with or come in touch with Netaji across the world, and of securing material on Netaji's activities – photographs, documents and objects. In 1958, he donated his Wanderer car – made in Germany in 1937 by the Auto Union, Audi's predecessor, and the vehicle of Netaji's great escape in January 1941 – as the first exhibit of the Netaji Museum he planned to build at Netaji Bhawan. It has been



displayed in Netaji Bhawan's driveway ever since and is a magnet for visitors today, having been beautifully restored to its original condition to commemorate the escape's seventy-fifth anniversary in 2016.

In 1961, Sisir Bose was able to open a museum showcasing Netaji's entire life at Netaji Bhawan. Spread over the first and second floors of Netaji Bhawan, it exists today as a state-of-the-art museum fit for the twenty-first century and attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors every year from across India and abroad (<https://netaji.org>). It has been visited by numerous heads of government, from Jawaharlal Nehru in 1961 and Indira Gandhi in 1969 to Japan's Shinzo Abe in 2007 and Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh in 2018. Sisir was inspired by European museums, particularly the display of Napoleon's life, rule and era in the Palace of Versailles near Paris, which he visited in 1948 with his parents, Sarat and Bivabati, during an extensive tour of European countries.

In the 1960s, the Netaji Research Bureau at Netaji Bhawan emerged as the hub of serious, substantive programmes and activities on Netaji's life and struggles, and as the gathering point for Netaji's comrades in struggle from across India – including leading members of the Azad Hind Government and famous INA officers such as S. A. Ayer, Prem and Lakshmi Sahgal, G. S. Dhillon and Abid Hasan, among numerous others – and throughout the world. General Fujiwara Iwaichi, the Japanese military officer who was instrumental in the formation of the INA in Singapore in 1942 and remained a friend of India all his life, was a frequent visitor from 1967 until his death in 1986. NRB and its steadily expanding archive also became the focal point for the growing number of historians across the world researching Netaji's life and the INA, including the American scholars Leonard Gordon and Joyce Lebra, who both went on to produce major works on Netaji and the Azad Hind movement.

In 1973, after fifteen years of arduous groundwork, NRB was able to convene a major international conference covering the entire range of Netaji's life, politics and struggles at Netaji Bhawan. The conference, inaugurated on 23 January, Netaji's birth anniversary, was attended and addressed by a galaxy of Netaji's colleagues and fellow fighters from across India and many countries in Asia and Europe, and by scholars who came from the United States and a number of countries in Europe and Asia.

A top NRB priority was to make Netaji's complete works – all his writings, speeches, proclamations and a lifetime of correspondence – available in published form for a global audience. This gigantic endeavour began from the early 1960s and gradually acquired momentum. Its most outstanding product is the *Netaji Collected Works*, published in twelve volumes by Netaji Research Bureau under the



editorship of Sisir K. Bose – joined later as co-editor by his elder son Sugata Bose, an eminent historian. There were other landmark publications, such as the enduringly popular *Netaji: A Pictorial Biography* (1979), edited by Sisir K. Bose from the vast amount of photographs and documents collected by then in NRB archives, and in 1997, on Netaji's birth centenary, *The Essential Writings of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose* (Sisir K. Bose and Sugata Bose, eds.), a distillation of the twelve-volume *Collected Works*.

It took decades of hard toil, with sparse finances and other odds, but by the time Sisir Kumar Bose passed away at eighty on 30 September 2000, he had realized his life's mission and, through Netaji Research Bureau, fulfilled his father Sarat Chandra Bose's vision of what Netaji Bhawan should be. Remarkably, he was able to concurrently pursue his own career and establish himself as one of India's most renowned paediatricians.

Netaji Research Bureau's success and stature is due above all to the commitment and perseverance of Dr Sisir Bose, its founder and builder. Yet, Sisir Bose did not do it all on his own. He had the quiet but deeply involved support of his spouse.

That explains why this volume is so powerfully authoritative. Krishna Bose learned about Netaji's life, politics and his struggle for India's freedom over decades, as a dedicated worker helping Sisir build up Netaji Research Bureau.

In the process, she met and came to know most of the protagonists featured in this volume's pages: Abid Hasan, Lakshmi Sahgal, Janaki Thevar (later Janaki Athi Nahappan, she was deputy commander of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment and lived in Malaysia), S. A. Ayer, Mian Akbar Shah, Cyril John Stracey, Prem Sahgal, G. S. Dhillon, N. G. Swami, Mahboob Ahmed and so many others who were Netaji's companions in struggle. She (and Sisir) even met Edward Farley Oaten – the professor at Calcutta's Presidency College whom the young Subhas allegedly assaulted in a famous incident in 1916 – at the aged professor's home outside London in 1971.

Krishna did not have the opportunity to personally meet the INA heroes General Mohammad Zaman Kiani and Colonels Habib-ur Rahman and Shaukat Malik – who all feature prominently in this book – because their ancestral homes were in Pakistan and they lived there after 1947 (though, at fifteen, she did see Rahman and Malik at a public felicitation in Calcutta in January 1946). But later, from the 1980s onwards, she met Kiani and Rahman's families many times – in both Pakistan and India. They came to Netaji Bhawan and she was close to them until her death.

The women in Netaji's life feature very centrally in this book. Krishna first met Emilie Schenkl, Netaji's wife, in Vienna in December 1959 and was extremely close to her until Emilie's death in 1996. Krishna did not personally meet Prabhavati Bose, Netaji's mother, who died in December 1943, or indeed Bivabati Bose, Sisir's



mother, who passed away in June 1954. But Krishna came to know Basanti Debi, the formidable widow of Netaji's political guru Deshbandhu Chittaranjan (C. R.) Das, very well indeed. Basanti Debi lived until 1974, in Calcutta, and was very close to both Sisir and Krishna Bose. Krishna's first-ever published article about Netaji (in Bengali, in 1962) was an account of Basanti Debi's poignant reminiscences of her dear Subhas. Of the four European women friends of Netaji's who form the subject of one of the chapters in this book, Krishna personally met and knew three – Kitty Kurti, Naomi Vetter and Hedy Fulop-Miller.

Krishna Bose was deeply acquainted with not just the *people* but also the *places* important in Netaji's life. Thus Singapore, Taipei, Tokyo, Kuala Lumpur, Vienna, Prague, Berlin and other cities come to life in her writings. So do the battlefields of Manipur where the INA waged its valiant struggle in 1944 and the Andamans, where Netaji hoisted the *charkha*-emblazoned tricolour in Port Blair on 30 December 1943 and inspected the notorious Cellular Jail. She has been to all these places – in many cases multiple times – and writes with the insight of a first-hand observer.

There is one other characteristic of Krishna Bose's work that bears mention. She was a very gifted writer. Her literary flair in Bengali is widely known. And she always wrote in a straightforward, eminently readable style. The articles in this volume are lessons in history, but they are also often evocative travelogues and penetrating sketches of personalities. The history lessons are couched in her signature storytelling style.

I have long felt that a prime selection of my mother's best writing on Netaji, the INA and the struggle for India's freedom should be available in English. The posthumous publication of this volume is slightly regrettable. My mother was so full of vitality till the end of her life, despite some physical infirmities due to advanced age, that I had expected her to live a few years longer, into her nineties. But there can be no better time for the publication of this volume – which presents a unique, composite portrait of Subhas Chandra Bose – than the seventy-fifth anniversary of India's independence, and just a few months after Netaji's 125<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary.

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A summary of the organization and contents of the volume is in order.

As a woman, Krishna Bose was especially interested in Netaji's relationships with women, and in the evolution of his views on women's rights and emancipation. In 1971, she wrote an essay (in English) on the four most important women in Subhas Chandra Bose's life: Prabhavati Bose, his mother; Basanti Debi, his political guru C. R. Das's wife, whom he addressed and referred to as 'Ma'; Bivabati Bose,



his older brother Sarat's wife, with whom he had a relationship of deep trust and affection; and Emilie Schenkl, the middle-class Austrian woman whom he met in Vienna in mid-1934 and married in December 1937, during a two-month trip to Europe. In September 1971, Krishna presented the paper at a conference at Prague's Oriental Institute (incidentally, Netaji had had close links with the Oriental Institute in the 1930s). It was subsequently published in *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, then edited by Khushwant Singh. A slightly edited version of the paper comprises the first section of this book: 'The Women Who Influenced Netaji'.

Another section, which appears later in the volume, is titled 'Netaji and Women: In War and Friendship'. It has two articles (both translated from Bengali).

The 'Rani of Jhansi Regiment' article, written in 1976, is the pioneering piece on the INA's women's regiment, formed as a combatant force in Singapore in 1943 at Netaji's personal initiative (and against much Japanese opposition). The Rani of Jhansi Regiment expanded further to about 1,500 members with new recruits in Burma once the INA forward headquarters moved to Rangoon in January 1944. There have been a few studies of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment in recent years, notably one by Joyce Lebra in 2008, but Krishna Bose's 1976 article remains the definitive contribution on the topic. Krishna was close to both Lakshmi Swaminathan-Sahgal (1914–2012), the Regiment's commander and minister of women's organization in the Azad Hind Government proclaimed in Singapore on 21 October 1943, and Janaki Thevar-Athi Nahappan (1925–2014), the deputy commander.

The other article is about Subhas Chandra Bose's close but little-known friendships with four European women: Jane Dharamvir, Kitty Kurti, Naomi Vetter and Hedy Fulop-Miller. As Krishna writes, in his adolescence and early youth Subhas was shy and diffident vis-à-vis women. This stiff rectitude began changing once he met Mrs Dharamvir – whom he called 'Didi' – in England in 1921. By 1925 he was urging his 'Ma' (Basanti Debi) to assume the political mantle of her prematurely deceased husband C. R. Das (1870–1925), and in the late 1920s he kept encouraging his sister-in-law Bivabati Bose to take a public role in the freedom movement. On arrival in Europe in 1933, he met Kitty Kurti (who was Czech) in Berlin, and Naomi Vetter and Hedy Fulop-Miller in Vienna. All three women became his close friends and vigorously supported his political activities in Europe during the 1930s. He deeply valued these friendships and their support. In the article titled 'Friendship', Krishna Bose casts light on this little-known aspect of Subhas Chandra Bose's life. These close friendships and collaborations with women help explain Netaji's evolution into 'a great feminist' – as Lakshmi Sahgal described him to Krishna.

Subhas Chandra Bose's equations with other major figures of his era form the subject of the section titled 'Netaji's Relationships with Indian and World Leaders'.



It consists of four articles which illuminate his relationships with Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore, Adolf Hitler and Eamon de Valera. Krishna Bose wrote the Nehru article shortly after Nehru's death in 1964 (in English, slightly edited for this publication). The other three articles she wrote in Bengali later, the most recent being the one on Bose and Tagore, written in the early 1990s.

All four articles are deeply informed and acutely analytical. She wonderfully brings out the mutual ambivalence in the Nehru-Bose relationship, and the similarities and divergences between the two leaders. Rabindranath Tagore and Subhas Chandra Bose were personally acquainted from 1921 onwards, when they happened to travel together on a ship returning from England to India (Bose after his famous resignation from the Indian Civil Service). Krishna Bose tells the remarkable story of how Tagore's attitude to Bose evolved over time from scepticism and coolness to resolute support. In 1939, when Bose was forced to resign from his elected second term as Congress president and effectively purged from the party, Tagore stood by him like a rock and hailed him as *Deshnayak* (Hero of the Nation).

The piece on Hitler is a penetrating analysis of the most controversial aspect of Netaji's political life – his willingness to seek assistance from the Third Reich and his time in Nazi Germany from April 1941 to January 1943. During this time, he met the Fuehrer once in Berlin's Reich Chancellery on 29 May 1942. The last article in this section is about Bose and Eamon de Valera, Ireland's most important political figure of the twentieth century. Many Indian freedom fighters, particularly in Bengal, were greatly inspired by the Irish struggle against Great Britain's colonial stranglehold. This article recounts Netaji's visit in 1936 to Ireland, during which he had several meetings in Dublin with de Valera, then the prime minister of the Irish Free State (now the Republic of Ireland).

The three sections which follow contain riveting narratives of the climactic period of Netaji's life (1941–1945) and the final war of India's independence waged under his leadership.

The first of these three sections – 'Azad Hind: Netaji's Epic Struggle in Europe and Asia, 1941–1945' – consists of a single, long article titled 'Abid Hasan's Eyewitness Account'. It is difficult to state in words how valuable this article is. Krishna Bose wrote it (in Bengali) on the basis of a marathon interview lasting several days, which she conducted with Abid Hasan at Sisir and Krishna's home in Calcutta in 1976.

Abid Hasan (1911–1984) was one of Netaji's closest companions in struggle all the way from 1941 to 1945. A native of Hyderabad, he was stranded as a student in Germany by the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. He joined the Azad Hind movement in Europe in May 1941, a month or so after Netaji's arrival in Berlin



in early April, and became both a worker of the Free India Centre and a volunteer soldier in the Indian Legion, a 3,000-strong force recruited mainly from British-Indian army POWs taken by the Germans – Erwin Rommel's famous Afrika Corps – in North Africa. In Germany, it was Abid Hasan who coined the greeting 'Jai Hind!', later India's national slogan.

Then, in February 1943, Netaji picked Abid Hasan to be his sole Indian companion on the epic journey by submarine – mostly on a German U-boat and later a Japanese submarine – which began in the north German port of Kiel and ended in Sumatra (Indonesia) in May 1943. That almost incredible three-month voyage is recounted in Abid Hasan's own telling in this article.

Abid Hasan continued to accompany his leader like a shadow thereafter – first in Tokyo, then in Singapore and finally in 1944 in Rangoon. In both Singapore and Rangoon, Abid Hasan lived in the same residences as Netaji and ran the household, besides performing other responsibilities. In Singapore, Abid Hasan wrote the lyrics of '*Subh Sukh Chain Ki*', the Azad Hind Government's Hindustani anthem, modelled on and set to the same tune as Tagore's '*Jana Gana Mana*'.

In May 1944, Abid Hasan – who held the rank of Major in the INA – went to the Manipur front and led INA battlefield troops with great skill in difficult circumstances, in fighting in the Manipur hills southeast of Imphal. In July–August 1944, he was among the officers who led INA forces in their heroic retreat back into Burma, during which very many died of malaria, typhus and dysentery, from aerial bombing and strafing by the enemy, and of exhaustion and hunger.

Finally, at the end of World War II in mid-August 1945, Abid Hasan flew with Netaji from Bangkok to Saigon. He was one of a handful of senior INA officers and Azad Hind Government ministers who saw Netaji off at Saigon airport in the early evening of 17 August 1945 on his onward flight, which ended in tragedy in Taipei on the afternoon of 18 August.

Abid Hasan's account of his time with Netaji from May 1941 to August 1945 is a treasure of India's history. It would likely never have been recorded and been lost to history had Krishna Bose not sat him down and extracted his memories from him in Calcutta in 1976, after his retirement from a distinguished post-independence career in the Indian Foreign Service, during which he had served in China, Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Denmark, among other countries. The interview is published in full in English for the first time in this volume.

The next two sections – 'Netaji's Soldiers: Remembering the Brave' and 'The Liberated Lands: Visiting Manipur and the Andamans' – bring to life the INA's campaign to liberate India in the final war of independence.

'Netaji's Soldiers' features articles on three extraordinary men: Mohammad



Zaman Kiani, Cyril John Stracey and Mian Akbar Shah.

Major-General Mohammad Zaman Kiani was the INA's seniormost field officer, the commander of the INA First Division whose brigades fought in northeast India in 1944. His name is not very well known in India because he was from the Rawalpindi district of Punjab and lived in Pakistan after the partition, where he died in 1981. When Netaji left Singapore for the last time in mid-August 1945, he designated Kiani to act in his absence on behalf of the Azad Hind Government and the INA – such was his confidence in his young general of thirty-five.

Prior to that, Kiani had commanded the column to which Netaji retreated under constant aerial attack from Rangoon to Bangkok in April–May 1945. Shortly before his death in Pakistan in 1981, M. Z. Kiani completed a wonderful book recounting his INA experiences, which he sent as a manuscript to Dr Sisir Bose in Calcutta with a letter requesting that it be published in India. Netaji Research Bureau facilitated the publication of the book, which Kiani had titled *India's Freedom Struggle and the Great INA: Memoirs of Mohammad Zaman Kiani*.

Colonel Cyril John Stracey's story is utterly fascinating. An Anglo-Indian officer in the British-Indian army, he joined the INA in 1942 after being taken prisoner by the Japanese in Malaya and wholeheartedly embraced the cause of India's freedom. After Netaji arrived in Southeast Asia and became the INA's Supreme Commander in mid-1943, Colonel Stracey became the INA's quartermaster-general (QMG) in Singapore. In July 1945, Netaji entrusted him with the task of erecting a memorial to the martyred soldiers of the INA on Singapore's seafront. Stracey designed and built an impressive memorial in record time, overcoming various difficulties. It was inaugurated by General Kiani about a week after Netaji's mid-August departure from Singapore, and blown up two weeks later on Lord Louis Mountbatten's orders.

In 1988, Sisir and Krishna Bose met and spent a day with C. J. Stracey in Coonoor, a small town in the Nilgiris, where he had retired after a distinguished post-independence career in the Indian Foreign Service. Stracey, who was ailing, died of a heart attack a few days later.

Mian Akbar Shah was not an INA officer. He was Subhas Chandra Bose's top political lieutenant in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). While Netaji relied primarily on his young nephew Sisir to handle the Calcutta end of the January 1941 escape from India, he entrusted Akbar Shah with the Peshawar end. In December 1940, Akbar Shah was summoned by telegram to Calcutta by Netaji and met both Netaji and Sisir at the 38/2 Elgin Road house (Netaji Bhawan), where they developed a coordinated plan for the escape from India.

After the partition, Akbar Shah was cut off from India. In June 1983, forty-two



years after their clandestine meeting in Calcutta, Sisir Bose and Akbar Shah (then aged eighty-five) had a memorable reunion in England. At this meeting, Akbar Shah told Sisir and Krishna every detail of Netaji's week-long stay in Peshawar, from his arrival by train disguised as a north Indian Muslim on 19 January 1941 till his departure for Afghanistan (Kabul) on the morning of 26 January, disguised this time as a deaf-and-mute Pashtun tribesman. That previously unknown story is recounted in Krishna's article on Akbar Shah. Krishna herself visited Peshawar and the Frontier Province [now known as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa] twice – in the mid-1990s and in 2005.

'The Liberated Lands' consists of two articles (both translated from Bengali): 'The Battlefields of Manipur' and 'Shaheed and Swaraj: Visiting the Andamans'. They are based on trips made by Krishna and Sisir Bose to the Andaman Islands in 1969 and Manipur in 1972.

Both articles are delightful travelogues, which bring to life Manipur and the Andamans as they were five decades ago. Simultaneously, they are moving accounts of the INA's valiant war in Manipur in 1944, which inspired many young Manipuris to join the movement, and of Netaji's historic visit to the Andamans in end-December 1943 – after the Japanese turned over the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to the Azad Hind Government, proclaimed two months earlier in Singapore. The Manipur article reveals that Netaji himself entered Manipur's southern Churachandpur district at the beginning of July 1944, a hitherto unknown event. This and the visit to the Andamans were the only occasions on which he returned to Indian soil after the 1941 escape from India. In the Andamans, Netaji visited the Cellular Jail (which he compared to the Bastille of French Revolution fame), addressed a rally in Port Blair, and visited Ross Island. Before leaving, he named the Andaman Islands 'Shaheed' and the Nicobar Islands 'Swaraj'.

The book's final section – 'Requiem' – has two articles: 'Meeting Professor Edward Farley Oaten' and 'Netaji's Last Journey: The Taipei Tragedy'.

E. F. Oaten (1884–1973) has a special place in Indian history. In 1916, he was beaten up by a group of students at Calcutta's Presidency College, where he taught, after an incident in which he is said to have misbehaved with students. Subhas Chandra Bose, just turned nineteen, was suspected to be the ringleader of the assault and was rusticated from the college and banned from Calcutta University for a period (he eventually completed his graduation from Calcutta's Scottish Church College before going to England to do a Tripos at Cambridge and successfully sit the Indian Civil Service examination). Subhas never explicitly acknowledged he was involved in assaulting Oaten, but did not deny it either. The Oaten incident, in a sense, was the beginning of the future Netaji's political career and Oaten has often



been demonized in its Indian telling.

On 30 September 1971, Sisir and Krishna Bose took a train from London's Waterloo station to Walton-on-Thames, just south of London. They were warmly received by Professor and Mrs Oaten and spent the day at their home. Professor Oaten, eighty-seven and nearly blind, was very excited to meet them. He spoke at length about Subhas, and very highly. Oaten was deeply grieved when he heard about Subhas's death in the air crash at Taipei in August 1945. An accomplished poet, he poured his feelings into poetry and wrote a sonnet which is, effectively, a eulogy to Subhas Chandra Bose the freedom fighter. Krishna had brought a tape recorder along and requested Oaten to recite the sonnet. The sonnet had been published in a book of Oaten's poems, but he could no longer read from books because of his failing eyesight. Instead, he recited it flawlessly from memory.

Krishna Bose visited Taipei three times: in 1979 with Sisir (who had already been there once, in 1965), and in 2002 and 2005. 'Netaji's Last Journey: The Taipei Tragedy' is the English translation of a Bengali article titled '*Mrityunjay*' (The Deathless Hero) she wrote in August 2017, on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of India's independence. The article weaves her narrative of her three visits to Taipei with an account of the full facts of Netaji's death on the evening of 18 August 1945 at the Japanese military hospital in Taipei. Netaji had been taken there with third-degree burn injuries sustained in the crash along with Colonel Habib-ur Rahman of the INA, his sole Indian companion on that last journey, who too was injured but survived.

It is a very moving piece on the mortal end of India's immortal leader.

I trust that this compilation of Krishna Bose's lifetime of work on Netaji and his struggle for India's freedom will enlighten Indians, and especially the young people of India, about Netaji's ideals and his vision of what free India should be.

I am immensely grateful to Pan Macmillan India, and especially to Teesta Guha Sarkar, for publishing this book under the Picador India imprint on the seventy-fifth anniversary of our independence.

I dedicate this book to Krishna Bose's life partner and soulmate, my father Dr Sisir Kumar Bose (1920-2000).

Jai Hind!

**Sumantra Bose**

Netaji Bhawan

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Kolkata, India

7 June 2022

## The Women Who Influenced Netaji



**PRABHABATI BOSE: MA-JANANI**

The Corsican patriot Pasquale Paoli admiringly called Letizia Bonaparte, Napoleon's mother, 'Cornelia', meaning mother of heroes, after the name of the mother of the Gracchi brothers, Gaius and Tiberius, who tried to reform ancient Rome. Prabhavati Bose, the mother of the Bose brothers, Sarat Chandra and Subhas Chandra, was similarly a remarkable woman. This is what Subhas had to say about her -

'And my mother? ... No doubt she ruled the roost and, where family affairs were concerned, hers was usually the last word. She had a strong will and when one added to that a keen sense of reality and sound common sense, it is easy to understand how she could dominate the domestic scene.'

By all accounts, Prabhavati was a strong personality. The future Netaji may have partly inherited his determination and will power from his mother. Some of his other qualities of leadership such as organizational ability can also be plausibly traced back to her.



Prabhabati Bose, Netaji's mother

In appearance, Prabhabati was short and somewhat plump. She had fourteen children with her husband Janakinath Bose: eight sons and six daughters. Prabhabati's facial features were rather Mongoloid, which can be seen in both Sarat and Subhas. She was extremely fair-complexioned, which apparently made up for everything else. And *Ma-Janani*, as she was universally known in the Bose family, herself had a fetish for fair skin ('Janani' being a synonym in formal Bengali for mother or 'Ma'; the title might be translated as 'Grand Mother'). Of her eight sons, she arranged the marriage of six – the youngest one died early and Subhas



eventually found his own partner in Emilie Schenkl, an Austrian from Vienna. She followed the same procedure in picking all six daughters-in-law. Basanti Debi, the wife of Subhas and Sarat's political guru Chittaranjan (C. R.) Das, says that Ma-Janani would compare the complexion of the girl with the inside of her own arm and insist that she must be at least a degree fairer. It was a difficult test for most Bengali girls to pass. Nonetheless, Ma-Janani succeeded in getting five 'memsahib' or pale-skinned daughters-in-law. For her eldest son Satish, in order to acquire a girl from a 'Kulin' family – the same sub-caste of the Kayasthas as the Boses, which was required in the case of the eldest son by family and social custom – she waived the rule and acquiesced to a not-so-fair bride.

Ma-Janani came from a well-known Calcutta family – the Dutts of Hatkhola. They were educated and established; her grandfather Kashinath had built a house of his own in Baranagar, just north of Calcutta, and was a prosperous man. The Dutt family's status was due among other reasons to what Subhas diplomatically described as 'their ability to adapt themselves to the new political order'. Several men of the family were employed in a British firm. Although from a neo-aristocratic family, Ma-Janani had no formal education.

She perhaps compensated for this with strict monitoring of her own sons' education. She was the proverbial disciplinarian. There is a story in the family of her supervision of the study time of the boys. A few of her sons and a couple of her younger brothers, whom she brought up along with her own sons, were busy studying. Ma-Janani patrolled to make sure they were not idling. Every time she approached there were hushed whispers – 'Mother is coming' – and one of her brothers started to recite an English passage in a loud voice, counting on her ignorance of English. After this happened several times, Ma-Janani confronted the culprit and said – 'Well, my dear, how come I hear the same passage every time I come?' She was not to be duped. Somewhat later in life, she learned some English from a tutor.

The relationship between the adolescent Subhas and his mother is revealed in a series of letters written by the son to the mother when he was fourteen or fifteen years old. From Netaji's autobiography, we know that with so many children in the household, Subhas, deeply sensitive, felt lost in the crowd. He bitterly regretted the lack of intimacy with his parents – especially since he held both Prabhabati and his father Janakinath Bose, who was mild by nature, in awe. There was a deep hankering in his heart for a closer relationship, for communication. This he tried to achieve by writing letters to his mother.

He poured out his soul in the letters: 'When I write letters I write like a madman. I do not know what I write – I do not care. Whatever comes to my mind, I write.' The teenaged Subhas shared his inner tumult with his emotionally distant mother



through letters.

These early letters are a bit odd considering the age of the person who wrote them. The dominant theme is religion and the attitude philosophic. He writes about the Bhagavad Gita, the Hindu text, and its injunction that one must do one's duty in this world without any thought of reward, that man has no right over the fruits of his work. Realization of God is the ultimate goal of human existence and without that life is not worth living, etc. He goes on in this vein in letter after letter. Unfortunately, his mother's letters are not available and so we do not know how she reacted to these outpourings. But he constantly sought her opinion on philosophic questions that both animated and troubled him. 'What do you say?' he writes. 'As all rivers ultimately find their way to the sea, so do all human lives reach their finality in God.'

Sometimes he asked her opinion on less high-brow matters. He wished to become a vegetarian and had given up eating meat. 'But today fourth brother (*nadada*) forced some meat on my plate and I had to take it.' He adds that he would not take to vegetarianism if she didn't approve. 'I will not do anything against your wishes.'

In the final phase of his school career, Subhas devoted a lot of thought to the meaning of education. What is the purpose of education? – it's acquiring the ability to judge right from wrong, he discerned. He very much wished to ascertain what his mother would like him to become – a judge, a magistrate, a barrister-at-Law, or a 'real man'. The pursuit of study by itself was not and cannot be the goal of one's life, he felt. University degrees mean nothing; character is what mattered. In young Subhas's emerging conception of moral values as revealed in the letters to his mother, devotion to God and love for one's country begin to intermingle.

The most interesting part is that his reverence for his mother starts to be equated with his sense of devotion to the motherland in its sorry plight:

'You are a mother but do you belong only to us? No, you are the mother of all Indians – If every Indian is a son to you, do not the sorrows of your sons make your heart cry out in agony?'

'Only Bengal's mothers can save Bengal,' Subhas asserted. To those familiar with the mother cult of Bengal, this is quite understandable. And ever since Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay composed '*Bande Mataram*', many Bengali youth had identified their own mother with the motherland and also with the Divine Mother, particularly the goddesses Durga and Kali.

What did Ma-Janani make of all this?

'You have come into this world only to bring about my death,' she said in despair to Subhas. At the age of sixteen, Subhas left home in search of a guru. When he returned home after a futile, frustrating search, Subhas found her very upset. She



had been driven to distraction by the thought that Subhas had left home for good. She had wanted to drown herself in the Ganges – only the thought of her daughters had prevented her from doing so. Subhas reported to a friend and accomplice in the bizarre escapade: 'Mother is a fanatic and says the next time I go she will also leave with me and not return home again.' The episode brought into sharp relief the mother's lack of emotional connection with her unusual son. Subhas felt it was not possible to reason with her; she was very displeased with him and thought that her son did not care for her in the least. There is a significant line in a letter at the time to his close friend Hemanta Sarkar –

'I think I'll not be able to understand her. I find Father [Janakinath] very reasonable.'

For Ma-Janani, the guru escapade was only the first of many crises she had to endure on account of her son. A few years later, Subhas was expelled from the prestigious Presidency College and temporarily rusticated from Calcutta University for allegedly being the ringleader of an assault on Edward F. Oaten, a young Presidency professor whose arrogant behaviour had offended some of the college's Indian students. Ma-Janani was in denial; she said, 'My Subhas can never do such a thing; he is incapable of doing such a thing.'





Janakinath Bose, Netaji's father

When Subhas quit his appointment to the Indian Civil Service and decided to serve his country by joining the freedom movement instead, it was another grave shock to the family, particularly his mother. Ma-Janani could hardly believe that her talented son was rejecting such a golden career. But when Subhas was arrested and jailed for the first time later that year (1921), Janakinath wrote to Sarat that he was 'proud of Subhas'. And Ma-Janani too became supportive of the choice her son had made.



What followed in Subhas's life was two decades of unrelenting struggle for India's freedom, including frequent arrests, protracted imprisonments and forced exile. His older brother (*mejdada*) Sarat and Sarat's wife Bivabati (*mejoboudidi*) were Subhas's main sources of support throughout. Then, in 1938, Subhas Chandra Bose was finally elected President of the Indian National Congress. Prabhavati, by then widowed – Janakinath had passed away in late 1934 – was immensely proud. She accompanied her son – the *Rashtrapati*, as the Congress president was referred to by the nationalist masses – to Haripura in Gujarat, where the Congress's annual session was held that year.

But Prabhavati's travails on account of her son were not yet over. Subhas's secret escape from India in January 1941 was another trauma for the old lady. He began the journey which made him Netaji from his room in the family's Elgin Road house (now Netaji Bhawan), where he had lived on her insistence since 1937. She lived in the adjacent room and had no idea of her son's plans. She was disconsolate on hearing of his disappearance and thought that Subhas had gone to the Himalayas to live as a hermit. She implored Sarat and Bivabati to tell her the truth. Basanti Debi recalls helpless tears in Sarat's eyes. Sarat Bose knew everything – his son Sisir had been his younger brother's chief accomplice in organizing and carrying out the escape. But Sarat was unable to tell his worried mother the truth.



Prabhavati Bose with Subhas in his bedroom at the Elgin Road residence, Calcutta, after the hungerstrike which forced the British to temporarily release him from prison, December 1940. Six weeks later, Netaji escaped from this room and house.

Ma-Janani Prabhavati Bose died in December 1943. At that time Subhas was not too far away, in Southeast Asia, as Supreme Commander of the Indian National Army/Azad Hind Fauj and Head of the Provisional Government of Free India (*Arzi Hukumat-e Azad Hind*), proclaimed in Singapore on 21 October 1943. One night in December 1943, Debnath Das, one of Bose's close associates in the Azad Hind



movement in Southeast Asia, found Netaji sitting alone, pensive, in his Singapore residence. This was just before Netaji moved to Rangoon to direct the INA's advance into India's northeast. Mr Das told Netaji he looked very tired and suggested that he go to bed. Netaji replied: 'No, I am not tired. I received news today that my mother has passed away.'

### **Notes**

*This article by Krishna Bose, written in 1971, has been slightly edited for this publication by Sumantra Bose. Ed.*



## BASANTI DEBI: MA

'You are the real mother of Subhas; I am only the nurse [*dhatrī*],' Prabhabati Bose used to say to Basanti Debi.

Basanti Debi, the widow of the legendary nationalist leader Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das (1870–1925) is still alive. [*Born in 1880, she died in 1974. Ed.*] She is now very elderly. But until a few years ago, she had a sharp memory and would recall her relationship with Subhas Chandra Bose with a strange mix of joy and sadness. She did so many a time to this writer.

When did she first see him? It was after the Oaten incident in Presidency College in 1916. One night a group of students came to see C. R. Das – then mainly known as a celebrated lawyer who defended Bengal's nationalist revolutionaries from draconian British laws – at his home. The couple were having dinner when the bearer brought in a visitors' slip. Deshbandhu said, 'Bring them in.' Basanti Debi was taken aback. 'You are not going to ask them into the dining room,' she said. 'Why not?' said Deshbandhu. In came the group and Subhas was one of them. He had been expelled from Presidency College and barred from Calcutta University for allegedly being the ringleader of a student assault on Edward F. Oaten, a young British professor whose arrogant conduct had offended the students. That was the first time she saw Subhas Chandra Bose. He was nineteen.





Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, Netaji's political mentor, with his wife Basanti Debi, whom Netaji addressed as 'Ma'

A few years passed. In 1921, Subhas's resignation from his appointment to the Indian Civil Service caused a sensation in India. He had already informed Deshbandhu about this from England and offered his services to the freedom movement. Subhas wrote: 'You are the apostle of our national service programme in Bengal. I have therefore come to you today with whatever little education, intelligence, strength and enthusiasm that I may possess.'

On arrival in Calcutta, he came to meet Deshbandhu. But Deshbandhu was away



from Calcutta and Basanti Debi was informed about the visitor. 'Subhas Bose has come,' she was told. 'You mean the Subhas Bose who has resigned from the ICS!' she exclaimed. They had a long chat that day. It was the beginning of a very special relationship. Netaji addressed and referred to Basanti Debi as 'Ma' for the rest of his life.

Whenever the guru and the disciple differed on any matter, Basanti Debi had to step in and mediate. In a letter to the eminent Bengali novelist Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Subhas wrote – 'Many people think we followed him [C. R. Das] blindly. As for myself, I can say that I fought with him on innumerable questions. Our quarrels were settled by Ma's mediation.' In 1924, Deshbandhu became the first elected Mayor of Calcutta and wanted Subhas to become the Chief Executive Officer of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation [CMC]. Subhas flatly refused. He told his mentor that he had not quit the ICS to become the CMC's chief executive. Deshbandhu, exasperated, turned to his wife: 'See if you can manage him.' After heated arguments, Basanti Debi finally persuaded him to accept the post. She told him that he need not accept the salary that came with the job and could simply hand it over to her, as money was always needed for good causes.

When Deshbandhu decided that the women of his family would take part in the non-cooperation movement and court arrest, Subhas objected. He thought that the women should come forward only once all the menfolk were behind bars, and it was unchivalrous to send the women out first. But Deshbandhu was adamant. Basanti Debi once again persuaded Subhas to come around. She even insisted that he accompany her to her *satyagraha* site. She was promptly arrested, and her arrest immediately aroused a wave of anger in Calcutta and across Bengal. The government realized that a blunder had been committed and at midnight she was suddenly released. Deshbandhu had been hoping to make use of the popular anger over Basanti Debi's arrest and was very disappointed when she unexpectedly arrived home. She told her husband: 'The police won't keep me in prison and you don't want me home. Where am I to go?'

Just as the husband and wife were arguing, Subhas arrived. When he saw Basanti Debi was back, he started to sob uncontrollably. She got distracted from the argument and got busy comforting him, assuring him that she was fine.

Netaji was a deeply emotional man and would break down easily. Deshbandhu gave him the moniker 'crying captain' and would tease him relentlessly about his crying habit. In 1933, Basanti Debi accompanied Bivabati Bose (my future mother-in-law) and her son, my future husband Sisir, then just turned thirteen, to visit Sarat and Subhas in Jubbulpore prison, where both the Bose brothers were jailed. Subhas was in poor health and about to go to Europe for medical treatment. When



the visitors were taking their leave, Netaji broke down and wept uncontrollably. Basanti Debi remained stoically calm. She gave Subhas one of her late husband's shawls and told him that Deshbandhu's blessings came with the shawl.

Subhas would speak frankly with Basanti Debi on personal matters. 'What about marriage?' she would ask him. There was a vague belief in India that Subhas had taken some sort of vow to not get married until India was free. But to her query he always answered: 'I certainly shall get married. I never said I won't.'

Many hopeful families approached Basanti Debi with marriage proposals for Subhas. Once a comical situation arose when the father of a girl offered to donate one lakh rupees to the Congress's Tilak Fund. On receiving the offer, Deshbandhu could not resist playing a prank on Subhas. He urgently summoned Subhas to his house, telling him there was important news. Subhas arrived and was thrilled when he heard about the proposed donation. Then Deshbandhu told him, keeping a straight face, that there was a catch involved. A catch? 'Well, yes, you will need to marry the gentleman's daughter.' Subhas did not find this funny at all and was furious. He had been about to sit down to dinner after a hard day's work when he was asked to rush to the Das residence. After a while, he calmed down and demanded that Basanti Debi make him dinner.

Cooking for Subhas was nothing unusual for Basanti Debi. She did it all the time. After Deshbandhu's death, he continued to be a frequent visitor to her home. Usually he came very late, and would then sit on her verandah and talk endlessly. Outside, the police CID men tailing him would have to wait hungry and tired as the night deepened, sometimes in driving rain. But Subhas did not share Basanti Debi's sympathy for the poor creatures. He would say: 'Let them wait and get wet. Traitors should suffer a little.' Before he departed, she would serve him a simple late-night dinner, a meal known as *bhat-e-bhat* in Bengali – just boiled rice with some vegetables. Subhas loved to eat this. Basanti Debi saw Subhas for the last time just before his escape abroad in January 1941 from the Bose family mansion at 38/2 Elgin Road. He had recently been released from prison after going on hunger strike and was still weak. She remembers that he smiled wistfully at her and said – 'So do keep in mind, you owe me a meal of *bhat-e-bhat* soon.' She still owes him that meal.

Chittaranjan Das died very prematurely in June 1925, at only fifty-four. Basanti Debi and Subhas reacted differently to the tragedy. Subhas, initially stunned with grief, decided that it was his beholden duty as a follower to take forward Deshbandhu's mission of liberating India. He, who had opposed Basanti Debi's participation in the non-cooperation movement, now wanted her to step into Deshbandhu's role of leadership. But Basanti Debi chose to withdraw from public life. Repeated attempts by Subhas to draw her into active politics failed. He tried to



motivate her by citing the examples of Madame Zaghlul Pasha (Safiya Khanum) of Egypt, known as *Umm-al-Misriyyin* (Mother of the Egyptians) and Madame Sun Yat-Sen (Soong Ching-ling) of China, who both stepped up to political leadership after their husbands' deaths, in 1927 and 1925 respectively. But she was unmoved by his entreaties. In frustration, he rebuked her – 'You are foremost among those who have neglected to do their duty after Deshbandhu's death'.

There were several reasons why Subhas wanted Basanti Debi to take on her husband's political mantle. Bengal Congress politics was riddled with factionalism and Subhas believed Basanti Debi could be a focal point of unity. But the deeper reason was his growing conviction that Indian women must not only participate in but lead the freedom movement. He took to reciting a well-known Bengali poem at political rallies – 'if India's women do not awake, how can India awake?' (*Na jagile aaj Bharat-lalana*). From 1927, he even tried to draw his sister-in-law Bivabati, his older brother and closest political comrade Sarat Chandra Bose's wife, into political activity. The ultimate product of this thinking was the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army during World War II. Meanwhile he extolled Basanti Debi: 'You are not only Chiraranjan's mother, you are the incarnation of Mother Bengal.'



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Netaji's letter to Basanti Debi from Mandalay Jail, Burma, 1926

There may have been a third reason why Subhas was so keen to see Basanti Debi assume political leadership. He was still not quite past the stage of his life where he needed a guru or guide to look up to, the role C. R. Das had filled since 1921. The transition from disciple to leader was psychologically daunting. So he initially sought to fill the void in his political life left by Deshbandhu by replacing him with Basanti Debi. When Deshbandhu died in Darjeeling – he was cremated in Calcutta in a massively attended funeral where Mahatma Gandhi led the mourners – Subhas was incarcerated by the Raj in Burma. He wrote to Basanti Debi: 'He who was at once my friend, philosopher and guide in my life's mission – is no more. Today I am utterly destitute. You are the only refuge of this helpless person.' He signed the







Basanti Debi's maternal love was not limited to Subhas alone. After my father-in-law Sarat Chandra Bose was arrested in early 1932 – he was imprisoned for the next three and a half years – my mother-in-law Bivabati had to fend for herself and their eight children. Basanti Debi became a great source of moral support to my future husband Sisir's family during that difficult time.

It was some time after my marriage to Sisir in December 1955 that he took me to meet the woman he called Thakuma (Granny) at her south Calcutta residence. I was fascinated by the tall, old lady who exuded dignity but also had a certain tragic aura about her. She spoke often of Subhas, always with a deep sense of longing and loss.

When Sisir launched the Netaji Museum in the 38/2 Elgin Road house (Netaji Bhawan) at the beginning of the 1960s, he approached Basanti Debi with a request. When Netaji returned from imprisonment in Burma in 1927, he brought back a number of Burmese items he had collected, including a teakwood chair and a beautiful marble statuette of the Buddha. The Buddha was put on display at 1 Woodburn Park, the newly built house next to Elgin Road where Sarat moved in with his family and Subhas early in 1928. In the early 1930s, Basanti Debi decided that the Buddha, being a symbol of renunciation, should not be kept in a family home. She took it away and installed it in a small shrine in Chittaranjan Seva Sadan, a women's hospital in south Calcutta established in Deshbandhu's memory. There it stayed for almost thirty years, until Sisir requested Thakuma to give it to him to be displayed in the Netaji Museum, where it became one of the early exhibits. She also donated a bunch of letters Subhas had written her to Netaji Research Bureau, the institution Sisir established at Netaji Bhawan in 1957.

Basanti Debi was without any doubt one of the most significant figures in Subhas Chandra Bose's life.

## Notes

*Krishna Bose wrote this piece in 1971, as part of a bigger article on four women who influenced Netaji – the others being his mother Prabhabati, his sister-in-law Bivabati, and his wife Emilie Schenkl. It has been slightly edited for this publication by Sumantra Bose. Ed.*



## BIVABATI BOSE: MEJOBODIDI

The relationship between the Bose Brothers of Bengal, Sarat and Subhas, is unique in the annals of modern Indian history and politics. For Netaji, his *Mejdada* (second eldest brother) Sarat Chandra Bose was a source of lifelong and unconditional love, solidarity and support. Seven years separated the two in age – Sarat was born in September 1889 and Subhas in January 1897. Sarat doted on his little brother, whom he endearingly called 'Kuka', from Subhas's infancy onwards. When Subhas was growing up, he was regarded as an oddball by many in the large Bose family, and Sarat was the only family member who detected something truly special in the boy. Subhas sought Sarat's approval for his decision to resign his appointment to the Indian Civil Service in a long letter written from Cambridge in 1921. Once Subhas returned and joined the freedom movement, the brothers became political comrades-in-arms under the mentorship of the great Chittaranjan Das (Desh-bandhu).

That comradeship was to be the permanent sheet-anchor of the future Netaji's political life. Sarat, a top barrister, was also an essential source of material support because Subhas had no livelihood of his own. When in late 1940 Netaji decided to leave India, he chose Sarat's son Sisir, my future husband, to assist his escape from Calcutta. In early 1943, Netaji embarked on yet another perilous journey – a three-month trip by submarine from northern Europe to southeast Asia to take command of the Indian National Army and the Azad Hind movement. On the eve of that journey, he wrote down a very personal letter, in Bengali, to his Mejdada. In it he disclosed that he had married in Europe and fathered a daughter. He wrote that he wanted Sarat to know this because he was quite unsure that he would survive the journey. The letter was a heartfelt plea: 'In my absence, please do show a little affection to my wife and daughter, as you have to me all my life.'

The Sarat-Subhas partnership is legendary and rightly so. What is less known is that there was a third person in the relationship – Sarat's wife, Bivabati.





Bivabati Bose, Netaji's sister-in-law (Mejoboudidi), wife of his older brother, Sarat Chandra Bose

Bivabati Dey was married to Sarat Chandra Bose on 9 December 1910 (to commemorate the anniversary, Sisir and I got married on the same date in 1955). She was from a *bonedi* (cultured, high-status) family of north Calcutta; the Dey family home was on College Square, a north Calcutta landmark. Unusually for families of the time, she was one of only two siblings. She had an older brother, Ajit, who doted on her. Shortly after the marriage, Sarat sailed to England to qualify as a barrister-at-law in London. He returned only in 1913. He communicated with his wife very frequently, mainly through postcards. Bivabati accumulated a mountain of postcards during the two years Sarat was away.

Bivabati was fourteen when she got married to Sarat, who was twenty-one. She had a delicate, almost ethereal beauty and stood out for her looks. Born in 1896, she was slightly older than her *daor* (younger brother-in-law) Subhas. He called her *Mejoboudidi* (second eldest sister-in-law). Despite being marginally older, she did not call him by his name but addressed and referred to him as *Chhorda* (youngest elder brother).





Sarat Bose and Bivabati with her parents and brother after their wedding, 1910

Traditionally, in a Bengali household, the relationship between a *boudi* and a *daor* was affectionate and close – sometimes it still is. Rabindranath Tagore had such a relationship with his *boudi*, the wife of his older brother Jyotirindranath Tagore. At its finest, the *boudi-daor* relationship was like that between an older sister and a younger brother, except that the two were not blood siblings. The relationship between Bivabati and Subhas developed in the same way and over time became an exemplar of mutual affection and regard.

Most of the letters Netaji wrote from Mandalay jail in Burma in 1925–26 are



sombre in tone. But the ones to Bivabati are markedly different. He recounted everyday life in prison in a light, humorous tone and described the antics of the criminal convicts who were his fellow inmates. It's as if he's trying to assure her that he's all right, and can still see the funny side of life. In fact, he suffered greatly in prison and the British government decided to bring him back to India in 1927 only after doctors said he could die in jail.

By this time, Sarat and Bivabati had five children (three more were yet to come). Apart from funny prison anecdotes, Subhas would enquire in his letters to Bivabati from Burmese prisons about the children, and dispense advice on their education and general upbringing. They should be taught painting and music, he suggested; he himself had not had the opportunity to do so in childhood. He reminded her that they must read the ancient Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. He suggested specific books for Bivabati to read as well, such as Maxim Gorky's *Mother*, and asked her to send him a copy so he could read it again. Subhas's concern for Sarat and Bivabati's children was abiding. When Sisir fell ill with malaria, he wrote to Bivabati that mosquito infestation at home must be tackled. A few years later, it was on Subhas's suggestion that Sisir's parents appointed a highly skilled artist, Harendranath Sengupta, to teach him sketching and painting at home.

When Subhas returned from Burma, it was decided a family vacation was in order. The scenic and salubrious hill town of Shillong, in India's northeast, was chosen as the destination. Three generations of the family congregated there. Janakinath and Prabhabati Bose joined their sons Subhas and Sarat, their daughter-in-law Bivabati, and Sarat and Bivabati's children, in Shillong. Sisir, who was seven, remembers his uncle spending hours playing merrily with him and the other children. A fun time was had by all and the happy faces in family photographs of the vacation testify to that. But then Subhas was left behind in Shillong to rest and recuperate from his prison ordeal while the others returned to Calcutta. He wrote to Bivabati: 'When all of you left suddenly, I felt lost. The empty house [Kelsall Lodge] gave me an eerie feeling. I felt very sad. It felt as if the daily routine of life snapped abruptly. It will be no exaggeration to say that I had heartache.' It was a touching admission of vulnerability and loneliness, and also a sign of just how much he had missed family life with Sarat, Bivabati and their kids during his incarceration in Burma. That he confided his inner feelings to Bivabati in such candid terms shows how close he felt to his Mejoboudidi.





Janakinath, Bivabati, Subhas and Sarat Bose vacationing in Shillong after Subhas's release from prison in Burma, 1927

After his return from England in 1921, Subhas did not live at 38/2 Elgin Road, the family residence his father Janakinath – a successful lawyer based since 1885 in Cuttack, Odisha – had built in Calcutta in 1909. He lived with Sarat, Bivabati and their growing family in an adjacent rented house, 38/1 Elgin Road. In early 1928, the construction of Sarat's own house on a road adjoining Elgin Road was completed, and Subhas moved into the new house – 1 Woodburn Park – with Sarat, Bivabati and their children. Subhas's bedroom was on the second floor of the sprawling house, and he had an office on the ground floor, next to Sarat's office. He lived there until 1937, when not in prison or in forced exile in Europe, where he spent most of the 1933–1936 period. In 1937, he moved into 38/2 Elgin Road in accordance with his widowed mother Prabhavati's wishes. He was based there during his turbulent two-term Congress presidency in 1938–1939 and his historic escape from India in January 1941 took place from 38/2 Elgin Road.

At Woodburn Park, Subhas's dependence on the mistress of the house sometimes bordered on the comical. At one point in the end-1920s or the beginning of the 1930s, when Bivabati was away from home for some time, he went to Basanti Debi – Chittaranjan Das's widow – to complain that the *dhopa* (washerman) was returning his *panjabis* (*kurtas*) with the buttons torn. 'He doesn't dare do this when Mejoboudidi is around,' he grumbled to Basanti Debi. And whenever he needed finances, he preferred to approach Mejoboudidi rather than ask his brother directly. Bivabati was also his official hostess whenever he had important guests visiting or staying at Woodburn Park, particularly those from abroad. Netaji was always very finicky about hospitality to his guests, especially foreigners.

Bivabati was not quite the mother-figure that Basanti Debi was in Netaji's life



from 1921 onwards. But the relationship with Bivabati was also different from the close friendships he formed during his sojourns in Europe in the 1930s with Central European women like Kitty Kurti and Naomi Vetter. With Bivabati, the affection of close friendship was very much there, but she was also his revered Mejdada's wife.

Bivabati's real mettle came out when Sarat Bose was arrested early in 1932; his brother was already imprisoned. For the next three and a half years, until Sarat returned home in July 1935, Bivabati had to take care of her large family on her own amid great financial hardship. Only a handful of loyal friends remained by the side of the family and helped out. Moreover, Sarat's political associates including underground revolutionary fighters of Bengal came to her for counsel in his absence. And for most of the 1933–1936 period, Netaji was in Europe in forced exile and needed finances, for essential medical treatment in particular. Bivabati Bose rose to all challenges with quiet but steely determination. She steered the ship during a time when the family lost its patriarch Janakinath, Sarat and Subhas's father, who died towards the end of 1934.

Bivabati's mettle was tested even more during the World War II years. In January 1941, her husband and she were among the very few people in the know about Netaji's escape from India, with her son Sisir, just twenty, as his uncle's chief accomplice. Then in early December 1941, Sarat Bose was arrested and taken away to south India. He was released only in September 1945, his health broken but spirit unbowed. Bivabati had to singlehandedly take care of her family amid continual surveillance and harassment by the British government, which at one point even threatened to requisition the Woodburn Park house and make the family homeless. Again, only a few very loyal friends helped out with money, gifts for the children, and emotional support.

Then in September 1942, police raided the house at dawn and arrested Sisir. Just before the police barged in and ransacked the residence, Bivabati went into her bathroom and burned a secret letter Netaji had sent Sarat from Kabul in March 1941, before commencing his journey from there to Germany via the Soviet Union. Sisir was taken away and lodged in Calcutta's Presidency Jail, where he fell critically ill with typhoid fever. Transferred after much effort by his mother and family friends to Calcutta's Medical College Hospital (Sisir was then a student at the Calcutta Medical College), he hovered between life and death for several weeks. When he recovered, he was sent home but served with a one-year 'home internment' order, until end-1943.

Bivabati's travails on account of Sisir were not yet over – the worst was still to come. In autumn 1944 Sisir was snatched off the street near 1 Woodburn Park, flown to Delhi and put in a dungeon cell at the Red Fort for about ten days before



being transferred by train to the Lahore Fort, the most notorious prison of the British Raj apart from the Cellular Jail in the Andamans. At Lahore Fort, Sisir was kept in solitary confinement in sub-human conditions for three and a half months and interrogated relentlessly. His mother had no idea where he was and feared he was dead. Eventually he was allowed to send her a postcard from Lahore Fort, with the address 'C/O The Additional Secretary to the Government of India (Home Department)'. This reached her in Calcutta sometime in December 1944. She did not see her son again until September 1945, when he arrived back in Calcutta after his release from the Lyallpur (present-day Faisalabad, Pakistan) jail, where he was held from February 1945.

C/o The Additional Secretary  
to the Government of India  
(Home Department)  
23<sup>rd</sup> November, 1944.

My dear mother,

You have to excuse my writing to you in English as that is the best thing to do under the present circumstances.

I just want to tell you that I am keeping well and that there is no cause for anxiety. There is no digestive trouble and we do not worry.

I hope to hear from you soon.

Sisir's postcard to his mother from Lahore Fort, 1944

Rabindranath Tagore once wrote a piece on Urmila, the wife of Lakshman in the Ramayana. He described Urmila as the neglected one in the epic, whose author did not elaborate on her suffering when her husband was in exile for fourteen years. Tagore used Urmila as a symbol for Indian women not getting their due recognition – the term he used is '*itihase upekshita*', women ignored in the rendering of history. Bivabati Bose is one such woman. The character and courage she showed through long years of struggle and periods of dire adversity means that she was much more than a homemaker, or the spouse of Sarat Chandra Bose and the beloved mejoboudidi of Netaji. She was a freedom fighter in her own right. Netaji must have been very proud of her.

## Notes

Krishna Bose wrote this article in 1971. Bivabati Bose passed away in June 1954, aged fifty-eight, a year and a half before Krishna Chaudhuri's marriage to Sisir Kumar Bose. The original article has been slightly edited for this publication by Sumantra Bose. Ed.



## EMILIE SCHENKL

"'India is my first love and only love,' that is what he told me' – Frau Emilie Schenkl said to this writer in the course of a conversation in her Vienna home.

But Mr A. C. N. Nambiar, who was Netaji's closest and most senior associate in Europe and knows Emilie well, thinks otherwise. When my husband Sisir and I met him at his home in Zurich [*in autumn 1971, ed.*], he told us in precisely the following words: 'No, it was not. He was deeply in love with her, you see. You see, in fact, it was an enormous, intense love for her that he had. He was very much in love with her, you see, that I know.'

Emilie Schenkl is an intensely private person and very averse to publicity. Yet, no discussion of the important women in Netaji's life can be complete without the woman he chose to be his wife! When I told Frau Schenkl that I wanted to include her in my study of the women who influenced Netaji most – alongside his mother Prabhavati Bose, his adopted mother Basanti Debi (Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das's wife) and Bivabati Bose, the wife of his older brother Sarat Chandra Bose – she laughed and said: 'I was not an important woman in his life at all!' That, however, is very far from true.

It seems that Subhas Chandra Bose and Emilie Schenkl hit it off almost immediately upon meeting in Vienna in June 1934. Netaji needed someone who knew English and had typing skills to type up the manuscript of his book *The Indian Struggle*. He asked an Indian friend who recommended a young woman of twenty-three, Emilie Schenkl. In the preface to *The Indian Struggle*, dated 29 November 1934, Subhas Chandra Bose wrote: 'In conclusion, I have to express my thanks to Fraulein E. Schenkl who assisted me in writing this book and to all those friends who have been of help to me in many ways.' She was the only person thanked by name in the preface.

From 1934 onwards, Subhas and Emilie kept in touch with each other through very regular correspondence – he wrote to her even at the busiest times and also from jail – and he came to Vienna every time he visited Europe. They went together to Bad Gastein, a spa resort in Austria's Salzburg province, as well as to Carlsbad/Karlovy Vary, a spa town in Czechoslovakia. Back in Calcutta, Basanti Debi once asked Subhas sometime in the later 1930s why he was so fond of Vienna and if there was a special someone there. Her query was largely in jest and to her surprise, she has told this writer, Subhas became flushed and made a spluttering denial. Auntie Emilie tells me that Subhas mentioned the incident to her and felt that Basanti Debi had sensed something was afoot!





Subhas Chandra Bose and Emilie Schenkl in Bad Gastein, Salzburg Province,  
Austria, March 1936

Netaji arrived in Berlin on 2 April 1941, two and a half months after his escape from India began with my future husband Sisir secretly driving him out of Calcutta on the night of 16–17 January 1941. The very next day, 3 April, he wrote to Emilie in Vienna: 'You will be surprised to get this letter from me and even more surprised to know that I am writing this from Berlin.' He asked her if she could join him in Berlin



as quickly as possible and cautioned her that she should address him as Orlando Mazzotta – the Italian pseudonym under which he had travelled from Kabul to Berlin via the Soviet Union – in her reply to his letter.



Subhas and Emilie in Bad Gastein, December 1937

In the Third Reich, relationships with foreigners deemed to be non-Aryan and racially inferior were frowned upon. Auntie Emilie says it was discreetly suggested to her that she should break off the relationship. She was asked to do so tactfully, under some pretext or other, without hurting feelings. There was much secretiveness about the relationship because of such circumstances, and Netaji too was perhaps unsure what the repercussions in India might be.

After the birth of their daughter Anita on 29 November 1942, Netaji came to see her and the child in Vienna in December, accompanied by A. C. N. Nambiar. The two had to make all sorts of feints to dodge the Nazi security services.

Netaji had come to Vienna once before the birth as well. He came to say goodbye to Emilie because it seemed he was all set to leave for East Asia in October 1942, by air from Rome. But that plan leaked out from the Italian government and had to be given up. His departure was then delayed by another three months. In the meantime, the baby was born. Leaving her six-week-old daughter in the care of her mother, Emilie came to Berlin to spend the last few weeks with Subhas. A lot of preparations had to be made. Netaji was in constant readiness to leave at very short notice. This time the plan was successfully kept secret. So much so that even Abid Hasan, who was to accompany Netaji, was not told anything of detail. Abid Hasan apparently thought they were going to Greece and he carried a Greek grammar book with him! [*Netaji embarked on the three-month submarine journey to East Asia from the port of Kiel in northern Germany on 9 February 1943. Ed.*]

Then, early in the morning of 8 February 1943, Netaji quietly left his residence on Berlin's Sophienstrasse. Emilie stayed on there for a few more days, on his instruction, in order to keep up appearances. She was never to see him again. An



incendiary bomb hit Sophienstrasse in the latter stages of the war and gutted the house, a large villa with almost thirty rooms. The house in which Subhas Chandra Bose lived for nearly two years with his wife no longer exists; indeed, even the street is not there any longer, Sisir and I found. [*in September 1971, ed.*] But Emilie receives a Christmas card from the former lady housekeeper even today.



Krishna Bose with Emilie Schenkl in Vienna, 26 December 1959. It was Krishna's twenty-ninth and Emilie's forty-ninth birthday.

Emilie Schenkl had not left her job in Vienna and was on a temporary transfer to Berlin. The authorities there asked her if she would like a permanent posting in Berlin. She declined and came back to her own city, and has lived there ever since. In the last phase of the war and the months that followed, life was very hard for her. The worst moment was when, sitting in her kitchen one evening in August 1945, she suddenly heard on the radio that the 'Indian Quisling' Subhas Bose had



been killed in an air crash in Formosa [as Taiwan was known then]. Her mother and sister looked at her in shock. Emilie got up slowly and went to the bedroom where Anita, not yet three, was peacefully sleeping. She kneeled by the bed. 'And I wept,' she told me and Sisir. [*In September 1971, ed.*] Around that time, Emilie's apartment was searched by British Army officers who took away several letters written to her by Netaji, never to be returned.

Just before embarking on his submarine journey across the world in early February of 1943, Netaji had handwritten a deeply personal letter in Bengali to his older brother Sarat Chandra Bose, which reached the latter in India after the end of the war. The English translation of the letter reads:





Krishna and Emilie at her home in Vienna, 1971. Photograph by Sisir K. Bose.

Revered Mejdada,

I am again about to embark on a perilous journey. This time towards home. I may not see the end of the road. If I meet such a danger during the journey I will not be able to communicate with you again in this life. Therefore I am giving you some news today – it will reach you in due course. I have married here and I have a daughter. In my absence please give my wife and daughter a little affection – as



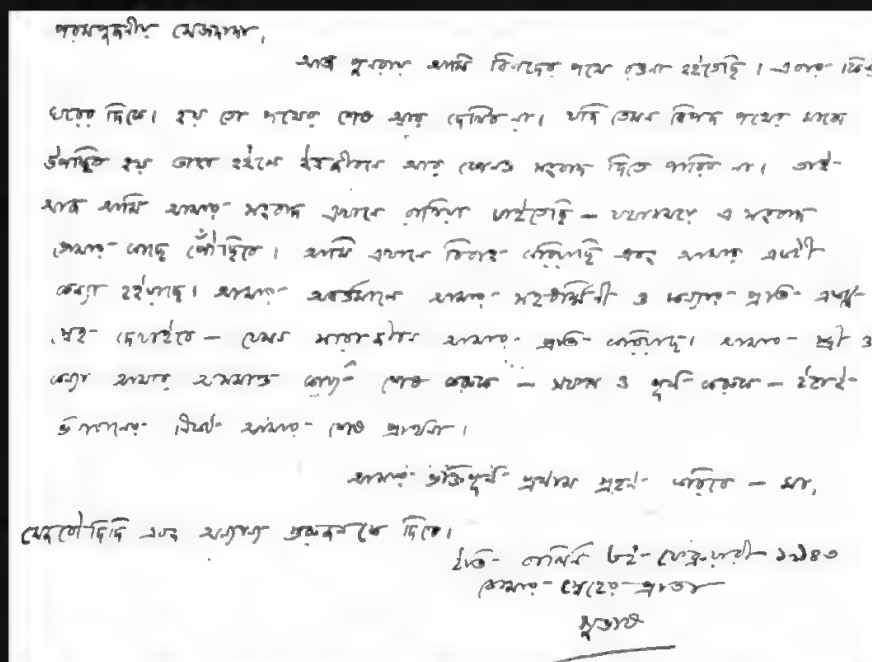
you have to me all my life. My last prayer before God is that my wife and daughter complete my unfinished tasks.

Please accept my deepest respects, and convey the same to Mother, Mejoboudidi, and other elders.

Your affectionate brother,

Subhas

Berlin, 8 February 1943



Subhas's letter of 8 February 1943 to Sarat Chandra Bose

In November 1948, Sarat Chandra Bose visited Vienna during an extensive tour of Europe, accompanied by Bivabati and Sisir. There they met Emilie, Anita and Emilie's mother. It was a truly moving and memorable experience. [This is recounted in detail in *Sisir Kumar Bose, Subhas and Sarat: An Intimate Memoir of the Bose Brothers*, Aleph Book Company, New Delhi, 2016. Ed.]

Did Emilie Schenkl influence Subhas Chandra Bose the political leader? That does not seem to have been the case. It was a purely personal connection between two people. Yet, she was very influenced by him. She gained a very impressive understanding of India's history, society, culture and politics from him. Even her Oxford English Dictionary, which I had occasion to use once in Vienna, was, she told me, a gift from her beloved Subhas.





Krishna and Sisir Bose with Emilie in Vienna, 1987. Photograph by Sumantra Bose.

Emilie Schenkl is a strong woman of independent spirit. It appears that Netaji liked tough, courageous women, the model of the Indian woman he tried to encourage through the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army.

Subhas Chandra Bose was shy and awkward with women for a long time, we have been told by many who knew him well, including his close friend Dilip Kumar Roy. It's interesting that the women he eventually formed close friendships with were all European. The first was Jane Dharamvir, an Englishwoman of Russian origin, whom he first met in England as a student in 1921. She was married to Dr N. R. Dharamvir, an Indian physician. The couple befriended young Subhas and it became a long-term connection. Subhas was greatly impressed by Mrs Dharamvir, a cultured and sophisticated woman, and was touched by her affection for him. He called her 'Didi' (older sister in Bengali). Later, during his sojourns in Europe in the 1930s, he formed close friendships with Naomi Vetter, who was from Vienna, and Hedy Fulop-Miller, who was originally from Budapest but whom he met in Vienna. Then there was Kitty Kurti – they met in Berlin but she was from Prague, the capital of the Czech lands. Decades later in the 1960s, Mrs Kurti wrote a wonderful memoir and tribute, *Subhas Chandra Bose As I Knew Him*.



Krishna Bose in Bad Gastein, 2008

There is a view in some circles in India that Subhas Chandra Bose could not have had the relationship he did with Emilie Schenkl. The notion of an ascetic dedicated to his nation and its freedom appeals to them. Basanti Debi gave a fitting reply to this: 'Don't you know that in the Indian attitude to life no rite of *dharma* is complete without the wife, and even Ramchandra had to have a golden Sita?'

A. C. N. Nambiar has this to say about the man he knew and observed closely: 'He was a one-idea man, a one-idea man, you can sum up – singly for the independence of India.'



But he goes on to say –

'I think the only departure, if one might use the word departure, was his love for Miss Schenkl; you see, otherwise he was completely absorbed.'

## Notes

*At the time Krishna Bose wrote this article in the early 1970s, the date of Emilie's marriage with Netaji was not clear. In the 1980s, Emilie clarified that they had got married on 26 December 1937 (her twenty-seventh birthday) at Bad Gastein, the spa village in the Austrian Alps (Salzburg province) which was a favourite retreat of theirs. In June 2008, Krishna Bose, Anita and her husband Martin Pfaff, Sugata Bose and Sumantra Bose visited Bad Gastein. They saw Emilie and Subhas's old haunts, including the Gruner Baum café and the Kurhaus Hochland, a small hotel.*

*A fiercely independent person, Emilie Schenkl lived on her own in Vienna for almost her entire life. In the early 1990s, after she turned eighty, she moved to her daughter Anita's home in Bavaria, on the outskirts of the city of Augsburg, which is about an hour from Munich. In June 1993, during a family reunion at Augsburg, Emilie handed over the letters from Netaji in her possession to Sisir Bose and gave him permission to publish them. These 162 letters, Krishna Bose had previously noticed during visits to Vienna, were kept on the lower shelf of Emilie's bedside table, tied with a ribbon. Sisir Bose already had in his possession eighteen letters written by Emilie to Netaji. These 180 letters were published in 1994 by Netaji Research Bureau, Calcutta as Volume 7 of the Netaji Collected Works (Sisir Kumar Bose and Sugata Bose, eds.), Letters to Emilie Schenkl, 1934-1942.*

*At another family reunion in Augsburg in June 1994, Emilie gave Krishna Bose one letter she had held back: a highly emotional, three-page declaration of love handwritten in English by Netaji in March 1936 just before leaving for India, where he was arrested on arrival by ship at Bombay port in April. The letter itself is undated but the envelope is postmarked March 5, 1936. He addresses Emilie as 'My darling!' and later as 'My angel!' and goes on to say: 'I do not know what the future has in store for me. Maybe I shall spend my life in prison, maybe I shall be shot or hanged ... Maybe I shall never see you again – maybe I shall not be able to write to you again ... but believe me, you will always live in my heart, in my thoughts and in my dreams ... If fate should separate us in this life – I shall long for you in my next life ... I have loved the woman in you, the soul in you. You are the first woman I have loved. God grant that you may also be the last.' On the third page of the letter, there is one further line: 'Please destroy after perusal.' This letter was included in The Essential Writings of Netaji Subhas Chandra*

Bose, published by Netaji Research Bureau, Calcutta (Sisir Kumar Bose and Sugata Bose, eds.) on the occasion of his birth centenary in 1997. The full facsimile of the letter is also included, along with many photographs from the Netaji Research Bureau archives and family albums, in *Krishna Bose's, Emilie and Subhas: A True Love Story* (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2016). This book has also been published in Bengali (2017) by Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, and in Hindi translation (2020) by Niyogi Books.

*Krishna Bose wrote this article in the early 1970s and it was published in The Illustrated Weekly of India, whose editor then was Khushwant Singh. It has been slightly edited for this publication by Sumantra Bose. Emilie Schenkl passed away in March 1996, at eighty-five. She and Krishna Bose, who passed away on 22 February 2020 at eighty-nine, shared the same birthday, 26 December, exactly twenty years apart (1910 and 1930 respectively). Ed.*



My darling! Even the iceberg sometimes melts and so it is with me now. I can no longer restrain myself from penning these few lines to convey my deep love for you - my darling - or as we would say in our own way - the queen of my heart. But do you love me - do you care for me - do you long for me? You called me "pranadika" - but did you mean it? Do you love me more than your own life? Is that possible? With us it may be possible - for a Hindu woman has, for centuries, given up her life for the sake of her love. But you Europeans have a different tradition. Moreover, why should you love me more than your own life? I am like a wandering bird that comes from afar, remains for a while, and then flies away to its distant home. For such a person why should you cherish so much love?

My dearest! In a few weeks I must fly to my distant home. My country calls me - my duty calls me - I must leave you and go back to my first love - my country. So after that I told you that I have already sold myself to my first love. I have very little left to give to any one. What little I have - I have given to you. It may not be worthy of you and of your great love for me - but that is all that I have to give - and you cannot expect anything more from me.

I do not know what the future has in store for me. Maybe, I shall spend my life in prison. Maybe - I shall be

shot or hanged. But whatever happens, I shall think of you and convey my gratitude to you in silence for your love for me. May be I shall never see you again — may be I shall not be able to write to you again when I am back — but believe me, you will always live in my heart, in my thoughts and in my dreams. If fate should thus separate us in this life — I shall long for you in my next life. And if you believe in my religion — pray similarly.

My angel! I thank you for loving me and for teaching me to love you.

My sweetest! Be a good girl, be a pure girl — and above all, be unselfish. Care not for any sorrow or suffering that may come. Sorrow and suffering cannot make you unhappy if you are unselfish. If you are selfish, nothing can make you happy. This is the only advice I can give you — your "guaru" (I think you once called me as such). I hate selfishness and I dislike selfish people. You have an unselfish heart — that is why I could love you. Make that heart more and more unselfish and you will increase your happiness in this life and after.

My queen! Should we not meet again after I leave Europe, think kindly of me. Do not blame me for not loving you more. I have given what I had — how can I give more? With these lines, I send you the tears that



are now flowing.

I never thought before that a woman's love could ensnare me. So many did love me before, but I never looked at them. But you, naughty woman, have caught me. And why?

Is this love of any earthly use? We who belong to two different lands — have we anything in common? My country, my people, my traditions, my habits and customs, my climate — in fact everything — is so different from yours. Then, why do you love? And what is it that you love? What is there in me that attracts you and compels you to love? Can you tell.

For the moment, I have forgotten all these differences that separate our countries. I have loved the woman in you — the soul in you. You are the first woman I have loved. God grant that you may also be the last. Adieu, my dearest!

Please destroy after perusal





## JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

When we look back at our struggle for independence, one is struck by the galaxy of outstanding leaders India produced during the first half of the twentieth century. It rarely happens in history that a nation produces around the same time leaders of the calibre of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose.

Of all the brilliant leaders of that era, a comparison of Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose is the most fascinating because it reveals certain similarities but at the same time basic dissimilarities between the two men. It's intriguing to speculate what would have happened if the two had been able to chalk out a common programme and India had been served at once by her two great sons.

But that was not to be. By 1939, a deep divide separated the two men. In April 1939, after the contentious and personally traumatic Tripuri session of the Indian National Congress, Bose wrote with manifest bitterness – 'Nobody has done more harm to me personally and to our cause in this crisis than Pandit Nehru.' And during the war, when rumours reached India that Bose was coming with the victorious Japanese, Nehru declared that he would be the first person to meet him with a drawn sword.



Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose

When Bose and Nehru first appeared on India's political scene in the early 1920s, they appeared alike in many ways. Both emerged as leaders of youth and both had a magnetic charm about them. No other leaders of the time possessed this youthful charm which cast a spell on the nationalist masses.

A glimpse into their growing-up years, however, reveals major differences. Both were born into well-to-do families. But Subhas turned his back on the life of



comfort and chose to embrace a self-imposed austerity when he was a stripling of fifteen. The letters he wrote to his mother Prabhavati and his older brother Sarat Chandra Bose even at that age reveal how his mind was tormented by the country's sorrowful plight. 'Will the condition of our country continue to go from bad to worse – will not any son of Mother India in distress, in total disregard of his selfish interests, dedicate his whole life to the cause of the Mother?' he wrote to his mother in 1912, aged fifteen. To his schoolfriend Hemanta Sarkar he wrote: 'My life is not for enjoyment, my life is a mission.' During Bose's time in Cambridge, his friend Dilip Kumar Roy says, he considered it a waste of time to read a novel or go to the theatre. He had a sense of urgency, of preparing for his life's mission.

For the young Nehru, thoughtful and imaginative as he was, there was no such sense of mission. Had Nehru not met Gandhi when he did, his life may have remained as it was. It was in 1920, when he was already into his thirties, that Nehru had an accidental meeting with a group of *kisans* (peasants) and suddenly became aware of the acute misery of the vast majority of his fellow Indians. He was deeply moved by the experience. He wrote: 'A new picture of India seemed to rise before me, naked, starving, crushed and utterly miserable.'

The first influence on Nehru outside of his own family was his Irish tutor, F. T. Brooks. For Bose, it was the Bengali headmaster of his school in Cuttack (Odisha), Beni Madhab Das, who impressed upon him the importance of moral values. The next important event in Nehru's life was his schooling in England, as a bright Indian boy with an interest in current affairs studying at the Harrow School. For Bose, who was seven years younger, the landmark event at the same age was becoming acquainted with the works of Swami Vivekananda:

'My headmaster had roused my aesthetic and moral sense – had given new impetus to my life – but he had not given me an ideal to which I could give my whole being. That Vivekananda gave me.'

The young Subhas went through a personal revolution of sorts when Vivekananda entered his life. The service of humanity that is your own salvation became his life's goal. At sixteen, he temporarily left home in search of a guru. Throughout his student years, Bose practiced 'Brahmacharya' and led a life of austerity amid his family's relative affluence. By contrast, Nehru writes in his autobiography that while in England he had the lifestyle of 'a man about town' and often exceeded the handsome allowance his father sent him from India. While at Cambridge, he 'enjoyed life and refused to see why I should consider it a thing of sin'. The contrast of the formative years of Nehru and Bose is truly striking.

Another note of comparison should be made here. That is regarding their attitude to religion. 'Of religion I had very hazy notions,' Nehru wrote, and he remained



an agnostic all his life. Bose did not care much for the ritualistic aspects of religion but he remained a deeply religious person in the broadest, most catholic sense of the term, all his life. Even during the frenetic time of the Azad Hind movement in Southeast Asia during World War II, his colleague S. A. Ayer has recorded, he would retire to meditate and emerge with fresh energy. Bose drew immense strength from his personal version of faith. It was for him, as he himself put it, a pragmatic necessity.

At the beginning of their political careers, the two strikingly handsome young leaders seemed to have a good deal in common. Their modernist orientation in politics and economics distinguished them from the deep-dyed Gandhians. Nehru and Bose shared a scientific approach towards India's problems that was fundamentally opposed to the Gandhian creed of spinning our way to Swaraj and theories of non-industrialization. But while Subhas would openly profess his views, Nehru was forever wavering between his loyalty to Gandhi and his own convictions.



Nehru and Bose

Bose set up the National Planning Committee – the forerunner of post-independence India's Planning Commission – when he became Congress president in 1938. He asked Nehru to be its chairman. He wrote to Nehru: 'I hope you will accept the chairmanship of the Planning Committee. You must if it is to be a success.'

Gandhi did not think much of the committee. But Nehru accepted the position regardless. Rabindranath Tagore, then in his final years, was very keen that the National Planning Committee should function effectively. In November 1938, as the Gandhi-Bose confrontation loomed, Tagore wanted a 'modernist' as Congress president. Tagore's secretary Anil Chanda wrote to Nehru: 'In his [Tagore's] opinion and in the opinion of us all too, there are only two genuine modernists in the High Command – you and Subhas Babu. Your active cooperation is already secured by your being the chairman of the Planning Committee and he [Tagore] therefore is very eager to see Subhas Babu again elected the President.'





Subhas Chandra Bose as Congress president at Haripura, Gujarat, 1938, with Rajendra Prasad, Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel and Pandit Nehru. Maulana Azad has his back to the camera at far right.

There was one other important field in which Nehru and Bose shared an interest: international affairs. That was unlike other Congress leaders, including Gandhi, who, when abroad, spent more time preaching principles of non-violence and the virtues of vegetarianism than in making India's case for freedom. Both Nehru and Bose travelled extensively in Europe and helped to win friends there for India's cause. But beyond this, they differed in their approach to India's foreign relations. Broadly speaking, Nehru tended to idealism and Bose to realism. Nehru was revolted by Nazism and the persecution of Europe's Jews. Bose on the other hand felt that the Indian struggle for freedom should override all other considerations. Thus, he stated: 'In connection with our foreign policy, the first suggestion that I have to make is we should not be influenced by the internal politics of any country or the form of its state. We shall find, in every country, men and women who will sympathize with India's freedom, no matter what their own political views may be.'

Jawaharlal Nehru was not just independent India's prime minister but also its foreign minister for nearly seventeen years, from August 1947 to May 1964. History is yet to properly judge his record on that front. Subhas Chandra Bose headed the Provisional Government of Free India – *Arzi Hukumat-e Azad Hind*, proclaimed in Singapore on 21 October 1943 – for less than two years. During that time, he showed remarkable boldness in dealing with powerful and ruthless men. As a representative of a colonized nation, he held his own against men like Japan's Tojo and earlier Hitler, whom he pulled up in their only meeting on 29 May 1942 for writing derogatory things about Indians and expressing open admiration for the British Empire. M. R. Vyas, who was a close associate of Bose in wartime Berlin, writes: 'In Netaji's actions I could perceive the truth of the political axiom generally attributed to Marshal Stalin; namely, that a good foreign minister is worth ten armies.'

The basic difference between the two men is summed up in one remark in a



letter of Nehru to Bose. This was in Nehru's reply to a letter Bose had written him in twenty-seven typed sheets. Bose had written: 'I have looked upon you as politically an elder brother and leader and often sought your advice.' The sentiment was appreciated by Nehru, who wrote back: 'I am grateful to you for this. Personally I have always had, and still have regard and affection for you though sometimes I did not like at all what you did or how you did it.' Why so? According to Nehru: 'To some extent, I suppose, we are temperamentally different and our approach to life and its problems is not the same.'

Besides the difference in temperament, one other factor came between the two men: Mahatma Gandhi. Nehru had a practically unconditional allegiance to Gandhi and Gandhi exercised a hypnotic power over him. But Bose, whilst deeply respectful of Gandhi, was not as mesmerized. Like Bose, Nehru did not agree with Gandhi on many matters big and small. But whenever a dilemma or crisis arose, he surrendered to Gandhi's will. Gandhi too showed great patience with Nehru in disagreement. On one such occasion, Gandhi wrote to a fretting Nehru: 'Resist me always when my suggestion does not appeal to your head or heart. I shall not love you the less for that resistance.' Gandhi did not show Bose the same affectionate consideration, above all in 1939, after Bose was re-elected to the Congress presidency against Gandhi's wishes and candidate in a democratic vote.

Bose knew very well Nehru's subservience to Gandhi and did not grudge it. Indeed, he wanted to leverage Nehru's unique relationship with Gandhi. Bose wrote to Nehru in 1936: 'Among the front-rank leaders of today you are the only one who we can look up to for leading the Congress in a progressive direction. Moreover, your position is unique and I think that even Mahatma Gandhi will be more accommodating towards you than towards anybody else.'

A Bose-Nehru 'progressive' alliance remains one of the most intriguing counterfactual scenarios of India's history. But it could be that Nehru regarded the younger man not so much as a potential ally but as a potential rival to India's post-Gandhi leadership.

The ultimate destinies of the two men were very different, and so is their place in Indian, Asian and world history. Jawaharlal Nehru is chiefly remembered today for his seventeen years in power in post-colonial India. Subhas Chandra Bose, on the other hand, lives in history and in the collective memory of the Indian people as the leader who challenged colonial power.

## Notes

*Krishna Bose wrote this article on Nehru and Bose shortly after Nehru's death in 1964 and it was published in The Statesman. It has been slightly edited for this publication*



by Sumantra Bose. Ed.

## RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Rabindranath Tagore and Subhas Chandra Bose are the two most iconic figures late modern Bengal has produced. The nature of their relationship is, however, not very well known.

Recently, Calcutta celebrated the tricentenary of its founding in 1690. The ceremonies included the cutting of giant-sized cakes and horse-carriage processions on the streets. Amid the frivolity, we seemed to forget to remember our real legacy bequeathed to us by our great figures, exemplified during the first half of the twentieth century in the realm of culture and civilization by Tagore and in the sphere of the political by Bose.

Sometimes, I feel that outsiders are more alive to this legacy than we Bengalis are. I recall that sometime in the 1960s, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto visited Calcutta when he was Pakistan's foreign minister. He told the media on his arrival that he was thrilled and honoured to be in the city of Rabindranath Tagore and Subhas Chandra Bose.

Tagore and Bose first met at sea, in July 1921. Subhas, aged twenty-four, was returning by ship from England to India after resigning from the Indian Civil Service to join the national struggle for freedom taking shape under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership. Tagore, aged sixty, happened to be a co-passenger on the ship. In his book *The Indian Struggle, 1920-1934*, published from London in January 1935, Netaji recalled that journey and wrote that he and Tagore had extensive conversations during the voyage. They discussed the mass non-cooperation movement that had been launched in India. Tagore expressed some reservations about the boycott of educational institutions. Bose got the impression that Tagore was not opposed to the movement as such, but wished for a greater emphasis on constructive activities so that a parallel structure of national institutions could emerge in opposition to the colonial state.

By the late 1920s and early 1930s, Subhas Chandra Bose had achieved national stature as a leader of the independence movement. But his relationship with Tagore remained distant and somewhat cool. Each seemed to regard the other with some doubt and scepticism. In February 1933, Netaji left India by ship for Europe, where he was to spend almost all his time for the next three years, until March 1936, operating across the continent as a roving ambassador of India and its freedom struggle. The reason for the departure was that his health had deteriorated very badly during a prolonged period of imprisonment in the early 1930s in jails in central India (present-day Madhya Pradesh) – Netaji was arrested and incarcerated



a total of eleven times between 1921 and 1940 – and the British government eventually allowed him to go to Europe for medical treatment. Before his departure for Europe, Netaji requested Tagore – who was of course a world-famous celebrity – to give him a letter of introduction he could use to meet dignitaries and eminent persons in Europe. Tagore did not decline the request but provided a very brief and dry letter. Netaji was deeply hurt – indeed offended – and never used that letter during the next three years in Europe.

In the second half of 1934, whilst living mostly in Vienna, Netaji wrote up his book *The Indian Struggle, 1920–1934*, which was published from London by Wishart and Company in January 1935. Before its publication, he wrote to Tagore to enquire if the poet might be able to request George Bernard Shaw or H. G. Wells to write a foreword to the book. Bose wrote that Tagore should not in any way feel obliged to do so, and referred to the letter-of-introduction episode. He further wrote that he was not asking Tagore to write the foreword himself because the book contained some criticism of Mahatma Gandhi, and he felt that the poet had become a blind admirer of Gandhi's. The letter is quite remarkable for its candour.

The Tagore–Bose relationship underwent a sea change in 1938–39. Towards the end of 1938, Netaji decided to seek a second one-year term as Congress president, this time against Gandhiji's wishes. Tagore, who normally would never intervene in the Congress's internal matters, came out openly and strongly in favour of a second term for Bose. He asked Nehru to come to Santiniketan to discuss the matter with him. In a letter to Nehru, Tagore's secretary Anil Chanda wrote: 'In his [Tagore's] opinion and in the opinion of all of us too, there are only two genuine modernists in the [Congress] High Command – you and Subhas Babu. Your active cooperation is already secured by your being chairman of the [National] Planning Committee and he [Tagore] is therefore very eager to see Subhas Babu again elected the [Congress] President.' In November 1938, as Congress president, Netaji had set up the Congress's 'National Planning Committee' (NPC) – the predecessor of the post-independence Planning Commission – with top scientists and experts to function as an advisory body on the modernization and development of free India, and made Nehru its chairman. Gandhi did not think much of the initiative but Nehru accepted the chairmanship – and presided over the NPC's inaugural meeting – after Bose wrote to him: 'I hope you will accept the chairmanship of the Planning Committee. You must if it is to be a success.' Tagore was quite right that Bose and Nehru stood out in the Congress leadership for their modernist orientation and scientific temper, in contrast to the deep-dyed Gandhians.

On 14 January 1939, as the contest for the Congress presidency loomed, Tagore wrote to Subhas that he wished to personally felicitate him at a public meeting in



Calcutta. Tagore had composed an address hailing Subhas as *Deshnayak* (Leader of the Nation) for the occasion. The event had to be postponed due to the imminent contest for the Congress presidency between Netaji and Gandhi's nominee, Pat-tabhi Sitaramayya. On 17 January, nonetheless, Tagore wrote to Subhas again, in a deeply affectionate tone. In this letter, he asked Subhas to not doubt his affection and respect for a moment.

At the end of January, Subhas Chandra Bose was re-elected Congress president, securing 1580 votes to Sitaramayya's 1375 among members of the All-India Congress Committee (AICC). Bose won most of the *pradeshes* (state units) across the country barring a few like Gujarat (Gandhi's home province) and Andhra (Sitaramayya's native province). Around the same time, Netaji visited Santiniketan and Tagore gave him a warm reception at the famous *amra kunja* (mango grove) there. In his speech, Tagore said that he had mentally accepted Subhas as India's leader and would make a public declaration to that effect in due course.



Subhas Chandra Bose with Rabindranath Tagore at Santiniketan's *amra kunja* (mango grove), January 1939





Bose with Tagore at the *amra kunja* felicitation the poet gave Subhas in Santiniketan, January 1939

Tagore was profoundly upset by the malicious and cruel treatment Netaji was subjected to by Gandhi's loyalists at the Congress's annual session held in Tripuri (in present-day Madhya Pradesh) in March 1939. Netaji had fallen seriously ill but attended the session nonetheless, though he was too weak to deliver his presidential address, which was read out on his behalf by his older brother Sarat Chandra Bose. Gandhi's loyalists in the Congress leadership spread vindictive rumours that Bose was feigning illness. At Tripuri, the infamous 'Pant resolution' was passed, ordering the re-elected president to appoint the Congress Working Committee (CWC) in consultation with and according to the wishes of Mahatma Gandhi. The resolution, moved by Govind Ballabh Pant, was *ultra vires* of the Congress constitution but Netaji allowed it to be moved and did not rule it out of order.

In late April, Gandhi arrived at Sodepur, a small town just north of Calcutta, and Netaji had several meetings there with him, accompanied by Pandit Nehru, who was as usual staying at Sarat Bose's 1 Woodburn Park house in Calcutta. [*Gandhi too would earlier stay there, and in 1937 and 1938 Tagore twice visited the Woodburn Park house, which is a two-minute walk from the Bose ancestral home on Elgin Road, now Netaji Bhawan, to meet the Mahatma. Gandhi visited the Elgin Road house in December 1945, by which time he was hailing Netaji as a 'prince among patriots'. Ed.*] But Gandhi, who was nursing a sense of bitter humiliation, refused any cooperation with the elected Congress president and the deadlock could not be broken. On 29 April 1939, Subhas Chandra Bose resigned as Congress president at the AICC meeting held in Calcutta's Wellington Square. His resignation speech was brief and dignified, and then he personally escorted Congress leaders including Rajendra Prasad and Nehru from the venue as angry protests broke out.



Rabindranath Tagore stood like a rock of support to Subhas through this crisis. While Subhas was at Tripuri, Tagore handwrote a letter addressed to him, which was not sent but is preserved. In the letter, Tagore expressed deep concern about Subhas's health and sympathy for the ordeal he was going through. He also repeated his desire to publicly felicitate Subhas. Then, on 29 March 1939, Tagore wrote to Gandhi. In this letter, he expressed shock and distress at how Subhas had been treated at Tripuri, which, he said, had deeply wounded Bengal's psyche. [*In the January 1939 presidential election, Netaji received the votes of 469 of Bengal's 538 AICC delegates; his opponent got 69 votes. Ed.*] He appealed to the Mahatma to immediately apply balm on those wounds with his own hands, to avoid aggravating the situation. Gandhi wrote back with a very brief acknowledgment of receipt of the letter, but maintained a stony silence on Tagore's heartfelt request.

On 2 April 1939, Tagore wrote to Subhas, urging him to stay steadfast and not contemplate resigning the Congress presidency, which he had won fairly and was rightfully his. He told Subhas that the hopes of the entire Indian nation lay with him and resigning would be a big error. He added that he was giving this advice in India's interest, and not in Subhas's own. When Netaji resigned at the end of April, he received a telegram from Santiniketan. In the telegram, Rabindranath Tagore said that the decency and restraint Subhas had shown in very adverse circumstances had reinforced his faith in Subhas's leadership, and told him that the apparent defeat would pave the way to permanent victory.

On 12 August 1939, the Congress high command took disciplinary action against Subhas Chandra Bose and he was effectively purged from the Congress. Tagore immediately sent a telegram to Gandhi. In the telegram, he wrote that in the interests of India as a whole and Bengal in particular, he was urging the CWC to immediately rescind the decision on Subhas and instead invite his wholehearted cooperation in a spirit of national unity.

Tagore's plea, of course, fell on deaf ears. But a week later, on 19 August 1939, Tagore came to Calcutta, despite being in poor health, and shared a public platform with Subhas. The occasion was the foundation stone-laying ceremony of Mahajati Sadan, a 'great house of the nation' that Netaji planned to build in Calcutta. Upon Netaji's release from a year of imprisonment in 1937, a 'Subhas Congress Fund' was established in his honour to raise donations from the people, and the proceeds were presented to him to spend on any public cause or project of his choosing. In 1938, the Calcutta Municipal Corporation leased a sizeable plot of land to Netaji on the city's Central Avenue (now Chittaranjan or C. R. Avenue) and Netaji began to plan the 'national house' of his dreams. [*Sisir Kumar Bose has written in his memoir Subhas and Sarat: 'He wanted to have a sprawling, modern building*



*where all aspects of our public life and culture would find expression. He conceived of a national institution where there would be facilities and opportunities for the young generations to build themselves up as able citizens of a forward-looking country. He submitted the project to Rabindranath Tagore and sought his support and blessings. He also asked the poet to give the building a name.' Ed.]*



Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra Bose and Subhas Chandra Bose at the foundation-laying ceremony of Mahajati Sadan in Calcutta, August 1939

At the foundation stone-laying ceremony of Mahajati Sadan – the name Tagore had given to the proposed institution – Tagore and Subhas Chandra Bose sat side by side in chairs on the dais and Sarat Chandra Bose sat on the floor between them. Both Rabindranath and Subhas gave stirring speeches. In his moving Bengali address, Tagore prayed that Bengalis strengthen India and contribute to India's progress and fulfilment [*Sisir Bose, aged nineteen, was present on the occasion and took a number of photographs. He has written in Subhas and Sarat: 'The crowd overflowed on the streets, as the pandal on the site was packed to capacity. People wanted to see Tagore and Uncle Subhas together. Volunteers had a hard time controlling the crowd ... It is a pity that subsequently Mahajati Sadan did not take the shape envisaged by the poet and his Deshnayak and exists only as a building without soul or substance.'* Ed.]

Tagore and Bose last met in early July of 1940, in Calcutta. A couple of hours after they met, Netaji was arrested – for the eleventh and last time in his political life – and taken away to the city's Presidency Jail.

Netaji was reluctantly released by the British government five months later, in early December of 1940, after going on a fast unto death. He had told the British in an ultimatum: 'Release me, or I will refuse to live.' The British got alarmed and let him out, but with the intention of incarcerating him again as soon as possible. Six weeks later, on the night of 16–17 January 1941, Subhas Chandra Bose secretly



escaped from the Bose family mansion at 38/2 Elgin Road, Calcutta, assisted by his twenty-year-old nephew Sisir – the beginning of his journey to becoming India's Netaji.

When news of the disappearance became public on 27 January 1941, there was consternation across the country. Mahatma Gandhi sent a telegram to Sarat Bose: 'Wire truth.' Tagore's telegram from Santiniketan read: 'Please keep me informed of news.' Sarat Bose, who knew everything about the brilliantly plotted and meticulously executed escape, cabled Tagore back that he hoped that wherever Subhas was, he would have the poet's blessings. At that point, Netaji had just crossed the northwest frontier of British India in disguise and was about to enter Afghanistan.

In mid-March 1941, Netaji left Kabul after six weeks, drove north to the Afghan-Soviet border and then travelled through the Soviet Union to Germany; he arrived in Berlin at the beginning of April. On 31 March 1941, a secret emissary arrived from the Frontier Province at Sarat Bose's Woodburn Park house and first met Sisir and then Sarat. This emissary brought the news of Netaji's departure from Kabul a fortnight earlier.

Sometime in April or May of 1941, Tagore asked Sarat Chandra Bose to come to Santiniketan. His health was failing and he was very worried about the future of Visva-Bharati, the university he had established at Santiniketan, once he was no more. He wanted to discuss the matter urgently with Sarat Bose and wished Sarat to play an active role in Visva-Bharati's affairs. Sarat and Bivabati Bose, my future parents-in-law [*though both passed away, in 1950 and 1954 respectively, before Krishna and Sisir got married in December 1955. Ed.*], went to Santiniketan to meet the ailing poet and stayed there for a couple of days.

During their conversations, Tagore brought up the 'missing' Subhas and said to Sarat in Bengali: '*Tumi amake bolte paro*' (You can tell me). It was a difficult moment for Sarat Chandra Bose, who had kept the 'truth' even from his and Subhas's aged and widowed mother, Prabhabati Bose. By this time, Sarat Bose knew that his younger brother had arrived in Berlin – where he was living in disguise under a fictitious Italian identity, Orlando Mazzotta. After a moment's hesitation, Sarat told Tagore that Subhas had reached Berlin and was safe and well. On returning to Calcutta, Sarat told Sisir that the poet's concern for Subhas was so sincere and heartfelt that he could not but tell him. Sarat also told Sisir that upon hearing the news, Tagore told him that he was not averse to a final revolutionary struggle for India's freedom initiated from outside the country, and that he favoured an understanding with the Soviet Union for this purpose. That of course was not to be, because Germany invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 [*In 1984, during a visit Sisir and Krishna Bose made to Santiniketan, they asked Rani Chanda, the widow of Tagore's*



secretary Anil Chanda, whether she had any memories of a visit by Sarat and Bivabati Bose to Santiniketan in 1941. Mrs Chanda said that one evening, Tagore wanted to speak confidentially with Sarat Bose. Others present were asked to leave the room and Anil Chanda stood guard at the door while they had this confidential conversation. Ed.]

About three months after this meeting, Rabindranath Tagore passed away, aged eighty, on 7 August 1941, in his family mansion in north Calcutta. The extraordinary eulogy to Subhas Chandra Bose titled 'Deshnayak' which he had composed at the beginning of 1939 was not published until after the end of World War II.

## Notes

*Krishna Bose delivered this address at the eleventh annual cultural convention of Bengalis living in North America in the early 1990s, held that year in Lowell, Massachusetts.*

*Tagore's 'Jana Gana Mana' was already emerging as India's de facto national anthem prior to Independence – though 'Bande Mataram' was also very popular and was rendered beautifully by a woman singer when Netaji proclaimed the Provisional Government of Free India at Singapore on 21 October 1943. At Netaji's last public appearance in Germany – in Berlin on 26 January 1943, a day observed by the Indian National Congress as 'Independence Day' since 1931 – 'Jana Gana Mana' was rendered by the Berlin Radio Orchestra at the end of the ceremony. The whole event was broadcast live by Berlin Radio and Sisir Kumar Bose, then under home internment, listened to it in Calcutta. In July 1943, the first group of recruits to the INA's Rani of Jhansi Regiment sang 'Jana Gana Mana' when Netaji inspected them in Singapore. Netaji then decided to have 'Subh Sukh Chain Ki', a Hindustani (Hindi-Urdu hybrid) variant of 'Jana Gana Mana' with a nearly identical tune, as the anthem of the Azad Hind movement in South-east Asia. Abid Hasan, Netaji's close associate from 1941 to 1945, mainly wrote the Hindustani lyrics. The INA's Captain Ram Singh Thakur, a gifted singer and violinist – Netaji personally presented him with a violin – was a leading performer of the 'Subh Sukh Chain Ki' anthem and the many other rousing songs in the INA's rich musical repertoire.*

*The 'Deshnayak' eulogy is difficult to render in translation. It is nonetheless reproduced in full below, translated into an English version from the Bengali by Sumantra Bose.*

*Subhaschandra,*

*As a Bengali poet, I on behalf of Bengal recognize you as Deshnayak. The Gita says*



*that a protector appears repeatedly for the protection of the good and the eradication of evil. It is when the nation sinks into misfortune that the pain of the oppressed people inspires the appearance of their leader. It is in such bad times that the right arm of a confident, powerful man is most needed, who can conquer adversity with courage on the path to victory.*

*Subhaschandra,*

*I observed you from afar when you began your mission for the nation. At that hazy moment of interplay of light and dark, hard suspicions about you arose in my mind, I hesitated to trust you fully, and sometimes I felt distressed by your errors, your weaknesses. Today you have emerged into the light of midday, and there is no scope for doubt any more; your identity is very clear.*

*You have absorbed so much experience in your life, and I see evidence of such strength in your matured sense of duty. That strength has been sorely tested by imprisonment, exile and illness, and nothing has deterred you. Your trials have expanded your mind, extended your horizons beyond national borders to the far-flung frontiers of history. You have turned adversity into opportunities, barriers into bridges. That has been possible because you have not accepted any defeat as the reflection of truth. We shall have to overcome the horror of this journey by riding on the back of this violent, evil era. In this perilous quest you will be able to provide inspiration; it is in that hope that I call on you to be the leader of the journey.*

*Those who are their nation's true representatives are never alone. They belong to all, their right is for ever. They stand on the mountaintop in the present and bring on the first rays of the future sunrise as the harbinger of progress. Remembering that, I recognize you today as the national leader of Bengal, and I call on the entire country to stand by you.*

*A long time ago, at another assembly, I had conveyed a message to the then un-arrived leader of the Bengali people. Today, many years later, on another occasion, I am recognizing the supreme leader of Bengal in person. The time when I could help him in his work is past; my strength is sapped. Today, as my last duty, I can just call on the will of Bengal. I can only pray that that will reinforces your will. Then, after blessing you, I will depart in the knowledge that you have made the sorrow of the nation your own, and that the final liberation of the country is coming as your ultimate reward.*



## ADOLF HITLER

The photograph is from 29 May 1942. The place: the Reich Chancellery in Berlin. Subhas Chandra Bose can be seen in profile, shaking hands with Adolf Hitler, who is looking at him with a somewhat bemused expression. A third man, the official interpreter Paul Schmidt, is visible. Joachim von Ribbentrop, the foreign minister, and Wilhelm Keppler, secretary of state in the Foreign Office, were also present at the only meeting Bose ever had with Hitler. It happened nearly fourteen months after Bose's arrival in Berlin at the beginning of April 1941, after his daring escape from India, and eight months before he left Germany in early February of 1943 and reached Southeast Asia after a three-month submarine journey.



Subhas Chandra Bose meeting Hitler at the Reich Chancellery, Berlin, 29 May 1942

The Czech-American historian Milan Hauner told the First International Netaji Conference convened at Calcutta's Netaji Bhawan by Netaji Research Bureau in January 1973 that 'the meeting with Hitler left Bose profoundly shocked and rid him of his last illusions, if he had any left, about German aid to the Indian national movement'. Indeed, according to Girija K. Mookerjee, a close associate of Bose in Germany, Netaji told Mookerjee after the meeting that Hitler was completely insane. *[Dr Girija K. Mookerjee, 1905-1974, delivered Netaji Research Bureau's annual 'Netaji Oration' at Netaji Bhawan, Kolkata, on 23 January 1965. The Netaji Oration was started in 1961 by Dr Sisir K. Bose, NRB's founder and its director from 1957 to 1999, to provide a high-profile platform on Netaji's birth anniversary each year for Netaji's close associates and comrades-in-arms to record their reminiscences. The inaugural Netaji Oration on 23 January 1961 was delivered by Mr S. A. Ayer, Netaji's close associate in Southeast Asia from 1943 to 1945. Ed.]*



Hitler held Indians in contempt as a racially inferior people and had made derogatory references to that effect in *Mein Kampf*. He was also an admirer of the British Empire. He believed that just as Germans were destined to subjugate and rule the sub-human Slavs (Russians and the various other Slavic nations) to their east, it was fit and right that the worthless Indians should be colonial subjects of Great Britain. He wrote that 'the loss of India by the British Empire would be a misfortune for the rest of the world, including Germany' and 'I as a German would far rather see India under British domination than that of any other nation'. His racist view of the world was so absolute that he was unhappy with the lightning military victories of Japan – supposedly an ally – in the first half of 1942. Hitler saw the Japanese as a 'yellow peril'. In late April of 1942, by which time the Japanese had overrun all of Britain's colonial possessions in southeast Asia and were approaching the Burma-India frontier, he expressed concern that the British were 'no longer strong enough to act as a dominant race'.

As for the Indian freedom movement, Hitler had always been dismissive. He wrote in *Mein Kampf* that 'the Indian agitators' would never be able to oust the British from the subcontinent. He mocked Indian nationalists as 'Asiatic jugglers' and wrote that 'I am prevented by my knowledge of the racial inferiority of these so-called "oppressed nations" from linking the destiny of my own people with theirs'. Hauner writes that during World War II, Hitler harboured 'wishful political dreams of a compromise peace with Britain at the expense of the non-European [colonized] nations' such as India so he could focus his war machine on the Soviet Union, which he viewed as the real and ultimate enemy. He declared that 'what India is for England, the territories of Russia will be for us. Our role in Russia will be analogous to that of England in India. The Russian space is our India. Like the English, we shall rule this empire with a handful of men.'

As an arch-imperialist, Herr Hitler clearly – and correctly – detected a kindred spirit in the greatest imperialist power of his times: Great Britain. Not only that, he saw in British imperialism a model for his so-called 'Third Reich' to emulate! Subhas Chandra Bose's life, on the other hand, was defined by a single-minded mission to liberate the Indian subcontinent and its people from the shackles of nearly two centuries of British colonial rule. It was indeed two very different and seemingly incompatible men who had that meeting on 29 May 1942 in Berlin.

Netaji had become very well acquainted with Europe during the 1930s. He arrived in Europe by ship from India in March 1933. His health had deteriorated badly during a lengthy imprisonment from 1931, and eventually the British government agreed to let him go to Europe for medical treatment. Netaji spent almost all of the next three years – until March 1936 – in Europe. During those three years he



worked tirelessly, despite his health problems, as the de facto ambassador of the Indian independence movement in Europe. He travelled extensively on the continent – west and east, north and south – and became very familiar with cities such as Vienna, Prague, Rome, Berlin and Dublin. Everywhere, he solicited support for India's freedom struggle. He spoke at meetings, cultivated contacts among the intelligentsia, and established personal relationships with top political figures including Mussolini in Italy, Eamon de Valera in Ireland, and Dr Edvard Benes in Czechoslovakia. It was also during this time that he wrote up and published his book *The Indian Struggle*, covering the period from 1920 to 1934. Published in January 1935 from London by Wishart and Company, it was immediately banned in India.

Netaji's arrival in Europe in March 1933 coincided with the Nazis' coming to power in Germany. Problems began immediately for Indian individuals and organizations in Germany. During the 1920s, an organization called the 'League of Oppressed Nations' had been formed in Europe (the Bengali scholar Benoy Kumar Sarkar was involved), which sought to promote friendly relations between Germany – defeated in World War I and humiliated thereafter – and movements for liberation from colonialism such as India's. According to Milan Hauner, 'Hitler always strongly resisted attempts by the "leftist Nazis" – the Strasser brothers, Count Reventlow and the young Goebbels – to associate the Nazi movement' with such initiatives. Hitler was never going to link Germany's destiny with the aspirations of inferior races, and he consistently believed that India's enslavement by Great Britain was both natural and right. In *Mein Kampf*, he described such initiatives as attempts to form 'a coalition of cripples' against the 'powerful state' of Great Britain, and mocked Indian nationalists as 'Asiatic mountebanks'.

As soon as Hitler came to power in March 1933, the League of Oppressed Nations was banned. So was the India Information Bureau, established in Berlin in 1929 at Jawaharlal Nehru's initiative and headed by A. C. N. Nambiar. The Bureau was closed down in March 1933 and Nambiar was expelled from Germany. The same Nambiar was to become Netaji's deputy in Europe during World War II, and Netaji would leave him in charge of the Free India Centre in Berlin upon departing Germany for East Asia in February 1943. But that came later. During 1933–1934, racist attacks on Indian students in Germany increased. Hauner writes that 'cases of racial maltreatment of Indian students in Germany and [Hermann] Goering's vociferous attacks on [Mahatma] Gandhi shocked Bose profoundly'.

Soon after arriving in Europe in 1933, Netaji met a young woman called Kitty Kurti in Berlin. From his looks and demeanour, she initially thought he must be an Eastern mystic, or possibly a philosopher, and was surprised to find that he was in



fact a political leader, an anti-colonial revolutionary. They soon became close friends. Kitty was actually from Prague, the capital of Czechoslovakia, and had studied in Vienna. *[Prague was one of Netaji's favourite cities in Europe, along with Vienna. He visited Prague repeatedly between 1933 and January 1936, and established friendly relations with Edvard Benes, who was Czechoslovakia's foreign minister and became the country's president in December 1935. In May 1934, an 'Indian Association' was launched at Prague's Lobkovic Palace under the auspices of the highly reputed Oriental Institute, which had been founded in Prague in 1922. Subhas Chandra Bose spoke at the inauguration. Professor Vincenc Lesny of the Oriental Institute, an eminent Indologist and a friend of Rabindranath Tagore, became the Indian Association's chairman and A. C. N. Nambiar, who had moved to Prague after being expelled from Germany, its secretary. Until 1938, the Indian Association was extremely active in promoting academic and cultural relations between Czechoslovakia and India, and Netaji stayed closely connected with its activities. In July 1938, when Netaji was Congress president, an Indo-Czechoslovak Society was founded in Bombay with him as its chairman. The society was formed as an act of solidarity with Czechoslovakia as Nazi aggression against that country became imminent. Ed.]*

Kitty Kurti detested the Nazis. She found them 'repugnant' and 'loathsome'. One day in 1933, Netaji had come to lunch at the Berlin home of Kitty and her husband Alexander Kurti, an engineer by profession. At the lunch table, Netaji casually mentioned that he had just, that morning, had a meeting with 'Herr Goering' – the top Nazi Hermann Goering. The Kurtis were aghast. Kitty Kurti has written: 'If there were opposites, complete opposites, surely they were Bose and Goering.' An argument ensued over lunch. Kitty Kurti recalls Netaji saying: 'British imperialism there can be just as intolerable as your Nazism here, I assure you.' *[In 1966, Kitty Kurti published a book titled Subhas Chandra Bose As I Knew Him. Ed.]*

Netaji became increasingly concerned about the Kurti couple's safety and future in Germany. Towards the end of 1935, he wrote to Kitty, advising them to leave Germany. He repeated the same advice when he came to Berlin on brief visits. The Kurtis initially thought of returning to Prague. But Netaji advised against that, and suggested they should emigrate to the United States. That is what Kitty and Alex Kurti did in the late 1930s, and Czechoslovakia was occupied by Nazi Germany in 1938–1939, before the outbreak of World War II. *[In January 1971, Kitty Kurti came to Calcutta from the United States and delivered the 'Netaji Oration' at Netaji Bhawan on 23 January 1971. In September 1971, Sisir and Krishna Bose met Kitty's family, including her elderly but very lively mother, during a visit to Prague. Sisir and Krishna Bose met Kitty and Alex Kurti the last time in May 1981 at their home in Connecticut. Some time in late 1941 or early 1942, Netaji made a deliberately low-profile visit to Prague,*



accompanied only by A. C. N. Nambiar, who had been forced to flee Prague when the Germans arrived there in 1939. Mr Nambiar told Sisir and Krishna Bose in Zurich in autumn 1971 that Netaji was deeply angered by the behaviour of the German occupation forces in the Czech lands and compared Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the occupation, with Robert Clive, who led the East India Company's predatory takeover of Bengal in the mid-eighteenth century. Heydrich was assassinated in Prague by Czech resistance fighters in mid-1942. Around that time, Professor Vincenc Lesny's son Ivan sent a letter to Netaji in Berlin. Professor Lesny, then aged sixty, had been arrested in Prague by the Nazis and the family feared he would either be executed or would die in prison. Netaji intervened and Professor Lesny was released. Ivan Lesny, a paediatrician like Sisir Bose and head of the department of paediatric neurology at Prague's Charles University, told Sisir and Krishna Bose this story when they met in Prague in September 1971. Ed.]

In a written communication in April 1934, Netaji asked the German government for an official clarification of their attitude to India, Indians and the independence struggle. He did not receive any and wrote a protest letter to *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi Party's newspaper. In December 1937, during a two-month visit to Europe prior to assuming the Congress presidency, he wrote to the German foreign ministry with a list of seven demands. He said 'there should be an apology for Herr Hitler's recent attack on India and General Goering's previous attack on Mahatma Gandhi' and that 'hostile statements about India in [Alfred] Rosenberg's book *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* should be withdrawn' [Rosenberg was a top Nazi ideologue. Ed.]. There was of course no response, but it is possible that his activism slightly eased the difficult situation of Indian students and other Indians residing in Germany, and reduced the pitch and volume of anti-Indian invective in the German press.

In late March of 1936, Subhas Chandra Bose prepared to depart Europe for India – where he was arrested and thrown into prison as soon as his ship docked in Bombay on 8 April 1936. On 25 March 1936, on the eve of his departure, he wrote to Dr Franz Thierfelder, a senior German academic, from Bad Gastein, a spa-village in Austria's Salzburg province where he was spending a few days in the company of Emilie Schenkl, an Austrian from Vienna whom he had met in mid-1934 in Vienna and who would be his future wife. The letter read: 'When I first visited Germany in 1933, I had hoped that the new German nation which had risen to consciousness of its national strength and self-respect would instinctively feel a deep sympathy for other nations struggling in the same direction. Today I regret that I have to return to India with the conviction that the new nationalism in Germany is not only narrow and selfish, but arrogant. The new racial philosophy which has a very weak



scientific foundation stands for the glorification of the white races in general, and the German race in particular.'

Netaji arrived in Berlin at the beginning of April 1941 – disguised as Orlando Mazzotta, a fictitious Italian – two and a half months after he escaped from the family mansion in Calcutta with Sisir's help and made his way from Peshawar to Kabul and then onwards through the Soviet Union. He became active as soon as he arrived. He presented his first memorandum to the German government a week after arriving, followed by another in early May. In end-April he had his first meeting with Ribbentrop, the foreign minister.

But less than three months after he arrived in Germany, Netaji's strategic calculations were upended when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. At one stroke, any possibility of an armed thrust into India from the northwest evaporated. In mid-July, Netaji unambiguously told Dr Woermann, the under-secretary of state in the Foreign Office, that 'the Indian people feel definitely that Germany is the aggressor and is for India, therefore, another dangerous imperialist power'. Nonetheless, he gathered a group of dedicated Indians around him in the Free India Centre in Berlin, which began operating from October 1941, and provided leadership to the Indian Legion, a force of several thousand men recruited mostly from POWs captured by the Germans in North Africa. He made his first broadcast to India over Azad Hind Radio, based in Berlin, on 19 February 1942, days after the fall of the British citadel, Singapore, to the Japanese.

By the time he met Hitler on 29 May 1942, the Japanese had swept through Southeast Asia and were poised on the Burma-India frontier. The Indian National Army had been formed in Singapore in February 1942, and tens of thousands of Indian POWs taken by the Japanese in Malaya and Singapore had joined. It was clear that Netaji's role now lay in East and Southeast Asia and that he must reach there as soon as possible.

The official transcript of the Hitler-Bose meeting in Berlin was not public when Sisir and I met Paul Schmidt, the interpreter present at the meeting, in Munich in December 1959. Mr Schmidt told us that the transcript was definitely in existence somewhere, and indeed it was later found in the archives of the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) and published in the original German in 1970. Netaji Research Bureau quickly obtained a microfilm of the transcript and it was published as an appendix, in English translation, in *Netaji and India's Freedom* (Sisir K. Bose, ed., 1975), the proceedings of the First International Netaji Conference held at Calcutta's Netaji Bhawan in January 1973. Mr Schmidt told us in Munich in 1959 that he was very impressed by the dignified manner in which Netaji conducted himself during the meeting with Hitler.



Netaji tried to deal as tactfully as possible with Hitler, thanking him for the hospitality he had received since his arrival in Germany almost fourteen months earlier and addressing him as 'an old and experienced revolutionary' from whom he sought 'advice'. The substantive points of discussion were three, and Hitler did the great bulk of the speaking.

The first matter was the public declaration of support for India's independence by the Axis Powers, which Netaji had been trying to secure for over a year. He had a few supporters in the German foreign office's special bureau for India, notably Adam von Trott and his deputy, Alexander Werth. *[Trott was executed by the Nazi regime in August 1944 for complicity in plotting the nearly successful assassination attempt on Hitler on 20 July 1944. Dr Alexander Werth became a great friend of Netaji Research Bureau. He delivered the Netaji Oration on 23 January 1969 at Netaji Bhawan on 'Netaji in Germany: An Eyewitness Account of the Indian Freedom Struggle in Europe During World War II', which was published as a slim book in January 1970 by NRB. He was also a prominent speaker at the First International Netaji Conference in January 1973. In July 1989, Sisir and Krishna Bose and their children spent a wonderful vacation with Helge Werth, Dr Werth's widow, at her home near St Moritz in Switzerland. Ed.]*

There were several drafts of the declaration, the first in May 1941, and an updated version was prepared on 22 February 1942. In May 1942, the Japanese as well as Mussolini were in favour of issuing a joint declaration supporting Indian independence, and Ribbentrop tried hard to persuade Hitler. But Hitler refused to budge. He told Netaji during their meeting that India was geographically very remote from Germany and he was not in favour of making 'proclamations' for rhetorical effect, which could not be followed up through military action. *[Apart from his softness towards British imperialism, Hitler was at this time focused on making a decisive military breakthrough in Russia. Ed.]*

The second topic was the urgent necessity of Netaji's travel to East Asia. Here Hitler was in agreement that Netaji should go there as soon as possible and take the help of the Japanese. However, he advised Netaji against an air journey as too dangerous. Instead, he suggested, Netaji should make the journey by submarine, and offered to place a German submarine at his disposal. He even showed Netaji the route of the journey on a map, and estimated it would take six weeks [it actually took three months].

But the departure by submarine took another eight months to materialize, and Netaji finally left the port of Kiel in northern Germany on a U-boat only on 9 February 1943. So when a mass uprising broke out in India in August 1942 in response to the Congress's 'Quit India' call, Netaji was still stuck in Germany, and the INA



and the Azad Hind movement in Southeast Asia were leaderless. Netaji became so impatient with the delay that he wanted to risk going by air, but a planned departure by air from Rome in October 1942 had to be cancelled when it leaked out from the Italian government.

The third matter Netaji brought up concerned the adverse remarks Hitler had made about India and Indians in *Mein Kampf* and on other occasions, which, Netaji said, 'had been greatly distorted by British propaganda and were being used for propaganda against Germany'. Netaji 'requested the Fuehrer to say something clarifying Germany's attitude towards India at a suitable opportunity', as 'this would clear things up as far as the Indian nation was concerned'. Hitler was in no mood to oblige and gave a convoluted and evasive response. But it showed something of Netaji's mettle – that he was prepared to raise the matter with the arch-racist.

The issue of Netaji and the Nazis can perhaps be understood through two quotes from Netaji himself. Netaji stated in the late 1930s: 'In connection with our foreign policy, the first suggestion I have to make is that we should not be influenced by the internal politics of any country or the form of its state. We shall find, in every country, men and women who will sympathize with India's freedom, no matter what their own political views may be.'

On Nazi Germany specifically, he wrote in an editorial in the *Forward Bloc* paper in March 1940: 'Germany may be Fascist and Imperialist, ruthless and cruel, but one cannot help admiring some qualities of hers: how she plans in advance, prepares accordingly, works according to a time-table, and strikes with lightning speed.' This strategically rooted stance was sharply at variance with Nehru's ideologically rooted opposition to Nazism and other forms of fascism. Indeed, as Hauner points out, Bose sharply condemned Japan's escalating aggression against China in the late 1930s and it was under his presidency in 1938 that 'strongly worded Congress declarations of solidarity with the Chinese people' were adopted. [*It was Subhas Chandra Bose, and not Jawaharlal Nehru, who organized the Congress's 'Indian Medical Mission' of five doctors to China in 1938. Ed.*] Yet a few years later, Netaji took Japan's help to launch and wage the final war of Indian independence from 1943 to 1945.

It can be said, though, that Netaji's flexible and pragmatic foreign policy in the pursuit of India's freedom ran into something of a brick wall with the Nazi German state and especially its leader. Ironically, in light of Hitler's flat rejection of a declaration supporting Indian independence in 1942, when Netaji proclaimed the *Arzi Hukumat-e-Azad Hind* (Provisional Government of Free India) in Singapore on 21 October 1943, Hitler's Germany was one of the nine recognizing governments.



## Notes

*In his Hindustani speech on 21 October 1943, Netaji referred with evident approval to how the Czechoslovaks had formed a government-in-exile in London after their country was overrun and occupied by Nazi Germany, a rather curious analogy coming from an Axis ally. Ed.*

## EAMON DE VALERA

In December 1935, Subhas Chandra Bose wrote in a letter to Mrs Woods, secretary of the Indian-Irish Independence League in Dublin, that he found it unfortunate that while so many Indians visited London, hardly any bothered to visit Dublin. If they did, he wrote, they could see and meet so many men and women who had made history and continued to do so.

Netaji's admiration of Ireland is easily explicable. The famous 'Easter Rising' of 1916 by a relative handful of Irish revolutionaries who challenged several centuries of British colonial rule was crushed after heavy fighting in Dublin and most of its leaders were subsequently executed by firing squad. But it paved the way for the Irish War of Independence of 1919 to 1921, when the Irish Republican Army (IRA) waged a guerrilla campaign – using 'flying columns', small and highly mobile units – that engulfed most of the countryside and made Ireland ungovernable for Britain. The British were forced to sign a truce with the IRA in July 1921 and open direct negotiations with the Irish nationalists, who sent a delegation to London for the purpose.

The result was the 'Anglo-Irish Treaty' of December 1921. The treaty created a semi-independent 'Irish Free State', covering twenty-six of Ireland's thirty-two counties. A bitter price was paid: six counties of the Ulster region in the north which contained a sizeable pro-British population were detached from the Free State, made into a new entity called 'Northern Ireland' and retained as part of Great Britain. The British were, of course, to inflict the same kind of deep cut – the partition – on us when they finally exited the subcontinent in 1947.

The Anglo-Irish Treaty was thus a partial victory for the Irish freedom fighters. But it was still a historic development in the annals of anti-colonial struggle. When World War I ended in November 1918, there was no sign that the British would concede anything significant to the Irish demand for self-determination. Now, just three years later, the world's mightiest imperialist power had been forced to relinquish most of Britain's first and oldest colony – Ireland, which an 'Act of Union' in 1800 had 'for ever' incorporated into the 'United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland'.

The Irish War of Independence and the birth of the Free State coincided with the emergence of Indian nationalism as a mass movement under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership. Gandhi was of course dogmatically committed to non-violent means, but the many Indian nationalists who were not were greatly inspired by the Irish example. It was a critical reference point for 'Masterda' Surya Sen and his



followers in the Chittagong uprising of 1930, to Bhagat Singh and his comrades, and to the youth of Bengal's revolutionary groups who waged a deadly armed campaign against the Raj from 1930 to 1934. Netaji himself wrote that there were hardly any educated households in Bengal where books on the Irish struggle could not be found. He noted that such books were often hard to come by because of British censorship, but whatever was available was devoured by students and youth.

Indeed, some of the enforcers of British rule in India had cut their teeth combating the Irish independence movement. One such figure was Sir John Anderson, who was governor of Bengal from 1932 to 1937 and went on to be a senior member of Winston Churchill's cabinet during World War II. Anderson was the British under-secretary of state for Ireland at the time of the Irish War of Independence and was linked to the 'Black and Tans', a force of ex-British soldiers from World War I specially raised to fight the IRA (the force's name referred to their uniforms, a mix of black and khaki). The Tans, as they were called, terrorized Ireland from 1919 to 1921 and committed numerous atrocities, including a massacre at a Gaelic football game in Dublin on 'Bloody Sunday' in November 1920 – which evoked comparisons to the much larger Jallianwala Bagh massacre of April 1919 – after the IRA gunned down fourteen British undercover operatives in Dublin. Anderson was selected to be Bengal's governor in 1932, around the peak of the armed campaign against the Raj by Bengal's underground youth groups, due to the reputation he had acquired in Ireland. He came close to being assassinated in May 1934, when Bengali revolutionaries opened fire on him while he was watching horse-racing in Darjeeling. He also survived two previous attempts in 1933 – once his train was bombed and another time a bomb exploded when he was addressing a university convocation. *[Anderson's predecessor as Bengal's governor, from 1927 to 1932, was Sir Francis Stanley Jackson, a former chairman of Britain's Conservative Party, the 'Tories', who had been the captain of England's Test cricket team in his youth. Jackson too narrowly escaped assassination in February 1932 when a twenty-year-old student, Bina Das, fired at him at the convocation ceremony of Calcutta University. Bina was the daughter of Beni Madhab Das, who had been Netaji's teacher at the Ravenshaw Collegiate School in Cuttack in Odisha and was the first inspirational figure in Netaji's life, to be followed by Swami Vivekananda – through his writings – and then in the early 1920s by Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, his mentor in politics. Ed.]*

For three years, from March 1933 until March 1936, Netaji spent almost all his time living and travelling in Europe. During these years of enforced exile, he worked tirelessly, despite health problems, as the roving ambassador of India's freedom struggle in numerous European countries and their capitals. He addressed public meetings, cultivated contacts with the intelligentsia, and established personal



relationships with top political leaders. One of those leaders was the legendary Eamon de Valera of Ireland. Born in 1882, de Valera, a mathematics teacher by profession, had commanded one of the six insurgent detachments in Dublin during the 1916 Easter Rising. It was his detachment that inflicted the heaviest casualties on the British forces during the week-long fighting. Sentenced to death after his capture, he narrowly escaped being executed.

After the Anglo-Irish Treaty, de Valera became the leader of the very large dissident faction of the Irish national movement who refused to accept the Treaty because it conferred only semi-independent status, partitioned the territory of Ireland, and stipulated an oath of allegiance to the British monarchy for members of the Free State's parliament. During the brutal Irish Civil War of 1922–1923 between pro-Treaty and anti-Treaty IRA forces, de Valera was the political leader of the dissident side and was imprisoned by the Free State government. [*The most famous casualty of the civil war was Michael Collins, the military leader of the 1919–1921 armed struggle, who was killed in a battle with anti-Treaty forces in August 1922. The Free State government executed seventy-seven anti-Treaty nationalists, including many veterans of the 1916 Easter Rising, by firing squad, and in 1923 there were 13,000 anti-Treaty nationalists in Free State prisons, many on hunger strike. Ed.*] Released in 1924, de Valera came to power in Dublin after elections in 1932 and immediately set in motion a policy to sever connections with Britain and put the Free State on a path of transition to becoming a fully sovereign Republic.

Subhas Chandra Bose arrived on the shores of Ireland on 31 January 1936, by an American ship called the *SS Washington*, on which he had sailed from the French (Normandy) port of Le Havre. It was an especially emotional moment for him, a journey of political pilgrimage. His first stop was the city of Cork, in southern Ireland. There, he began by placing flowers at the grave of Terence MacSwiney, the former mayor of Cork. MacSwiney (1879–1920), a poet and playwright who was elected Cork's mayor in March 1920, was arrested by the British in August 1920 and convicted of 'sedition' – the same charge used to imprison Bal Gangadhar Tilak in Mandalay, Burma from 1908 to 1914 and later Mahatma Gandhi in India from 1922 to 1924. [*Like Tilak, Netaji was also imprisoned in Mandalay for an extended period between 1924 and 1927. Ed.*] MacSwiney was taken to England and incarcerated in the Brixton prison in south London. He immediately commenced a fast unto death and died in late October of 1920 after seventy-three days on hunger strike. After visiting MacSwiney's grave in Cork, Netaji met with members of his family and had a long interaction with his sister. Netaji was ceremonially welcomed to Cork by the city's mayor, Sean French. [*MacSwiney had become mayor of Cork in March 1920 after the previous mayor Tomás Mac Curtain, elected in January 1920, was shot dead*



*by British assassins, probably from the Black and Tans. Ed.].*

The visit to Cork had a particular resonance for Netaji. In September 1929, nine years after MacSwiney's death in the jail in London, Jatindranath (Jatin) Das, one of Netaji's closest followers in Bengal, died in prison in faraway Lahore, in the Punjab, after sixty-two days on hunger strike. Netaji led Jatin Das's gigantic funeral procession in Calcutta and supervised the cremation of his mortal remains. Shortly afterwards, a telegram arrived in Calcutta from Cork, Ireland. It read: 'Family of Terence MacSwiney have heard with grief and pride of the death of Jatin Das. Freedom will come.' [Sisir Kumar Bose, *Krishna's future husband*, has written in his memoir *Subhas and Sarat: An Intimate Memoir of the Bose Brothers*: 'I distinctly remember one particular incident from that time. I was only nine but the memory is etched in my mind even today. It was evening and Uncle Subhas came up the first flight of stairs at Woodburn Park unusually slowly and looking extremely grave. He stopped and stood still in the first floor's hallway. He was like a marble statue. Then Mother [Bivabati Bose] came out into the hallway. He handed her a small packet wrapped in paper and said in a choked voice in Bengali: 'A little bit of Jatin Das's mortal remains, please preserve them with care,' Ed.].

# PROMINENT INDIAN'S VISIT

## HOPES TO MEET PARTY CHIEFS

Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose, President of the Bengal Congress, former President of the Indian Trade Unions Congress, and former Mayor of Calcutta, arrived in Dublin from Cork yesterday evening. He travelled from Havre to Cork, having been refused a permit to travel to England.

On his arrival at Kingsbridge he was met by Madame Maud Gonne McBride, MRS M. Woods, and Miss B. O'Mullane, members of the Irish-Indian Independence League, formed by the late Mr. V. J. Patel during his visit to Dublin some three years ago.

Mr. Bose is staying at the Shelbourne Hotel for his sojourn in Ireland, which will extend over some ten or twelve days.

### WEEK-END REST.

When interviewed by a "Sunday Independent" representative after his arrival, Mr. Bose said he was tired and wished to rest.

Asked if he had any comment to make on the refusal of the British Government to allow him to travel through Great Britain, he replied that he would have something to say, but not at the moment. He expressed a wish to rest during the week-end, and does not intend to open his visit officially until to-morrow.

During his stay he hopes to meet President de Valera and members of the Government, the Lord Mayor, and leaders of the various parties.

### INDIA AND IRELAND.

In common with all the people of India, said Mr. Bose, he had a great admiration for President de Valera and the Irish people. The Irish struggle for liberty had been followed with profound sympathy by millions of Indians, who were also struggling for national freedom at the same time, and the success of Ireland had given new heart to India.

"I had read much about your country before I came here," concluded Mr. Bose, "and from what I have seen of it on my



MR. SUBHAS CHANDRA BOSE  
photographed in his hotel on  
arrival in Dublin last night.

journer from Cork, I could see that all I read about it is true, and that it is a very lovely country."

### NEW CONGRESS PRESIDENT.

Pandit Nehru has been elected President of the Indian National Congress, it is officially announced at Simla (Bihar). He was President in 1933. He has been imprisoned five times for his Nationalist activities, and is regarded as Gandhi's future successor.—Reuter.

### RAIL PORTER'S INJURY

In a case at Listercl, in which Michael O'Sullivan was fined £2 for assaulting Maurice Dore, railway porter, and £2 for using obscene language (with 20/- costs), Mr. Macauley, solicitor, said the railway company took a serious view of the case, as Dore, who was four weeks in hospital with a broken arm, would receive compensation which was less than his wages.

"It shows what a drunken fool can do," said Mr. Kenoy, D.J.

Newspaper coverage of Netaji's visit to Ireland, February 1936

From Cork, Netaji travelled to Dublin, where he was hosted by the Indian-Irish Independence League. On 2 February 1936, the *Sunday Independent* newspaper devoted almost an entire page to the news of his arrival in Dublin, headlined



'Prominent Indian's Visit', along with a photograph taken at his hotel.

The Indian-Irish Independence League had been formed at the initiative of Vithalbhai Patel. Vithalbhai (1873–1933), older brother of Vallabhbhai Patel, was a prominent leader of the national movement. He was a co-founder of the Swaraj Party in 1922–1923 along with Chittaranjan (C. R.) Das and Motilal Nehru, and the speaker of the central legislative assembly from 1923 to 1928. Vithalbhai Patel spent the last years of his life advocating for Indian independence abroad, in the United States and Europe. He met Netaji upon the latter's arrival in Europe in March 1933 and took a great liking to him. Before he passed away in Geneva in October 1933, Vithalbhai Patel made a will in which he left a large sum of money, entrusted to Subhas Chandra Bose, to support the work of the Indian-Irish Independence League and similar organizations in other European countries. Unfortunately, Vallabhbhai Patel disputed the will and Netaji never got the money to carry out what was effectively Vithalbhai's last wish.

Despite this, the Indian-Irish Independence League continued to function. At the time of Netaji's visit to Ireland in early 1936, its president was Madame Maud Gonne MacBride (1866–1953), the legendary English-born heroine of the Irish national struggle, and Mrs Woods was its secretary. The League organized a grand reception and public meeting for Netaji, chaired by Madame MacBride, at Dublin's Broadway restaurant. The gentleman who gave the vote of thanks brought the house down when he said that he looked forward to the day when the mayor of Dublin would be prevented from entering Britain. This was a reference to the British government's ban on Netaji, who was the mayor of Calcutta in 1930–1931, from entering the United Kingdom, where they feared he would say inappropriate things and mobilize supporters of Indian independence.

In Dublin, Netaji stayed at the stately Shelbourne Hotel in the heart of the city. [*The Shelbourne, founded in 1824, is a Dublin landmark and still a top luxury hotel. Sisir and Krishna Bose stayed there in the mid-1990s. Ed.*] A funny incident happened at the hotel when Netaji ran into a fellow guest, a Lieutenant-Colonel Smith. The man had been the superintendent of the Mandalay jail in Burma when Netaji was incarcerated there a decade earlier. The *Irish Press*, a mass-circulated daily founded by Éamon de Valera in 1931 which gave Netaji's entire visit prominent coverage, reported that 'the two men had a talk and exchanged views on their last meeting in different circumstances'. The paper continued to support Netaji from then on. When Netaji was arrested in April 1936 on his return from Europe as soon as he disembarked from his ship, the *Conte Verde*, in Bombay, Emilie Schenkl – his future wife – sent Mrs Woods an article on him from Vienna for publication in the paper. In the covering letter, Emilie wrote with some indignation: 'It is a shame how he is



treated by the British.'

The highlight of Netaji's visit to Ireland was meeting Eamon de Valera, the president of the executive council of the Irish Free State (i.e., the prime minister). The Irish leader had already read Netaji's book, *The Indian Struggle, 1920-1934*, upon its publication from London in January 1935. Netaji and de Valera met and held discussions no fewer than three times during Netaji's one-week stay in Dublin (a fourth meeting had to be cancelled due to the sudden death of Brian de Valera, de Valera's son). Both men gave careful, guarded reactions when asked by the media about their discussions. Netaji said: 'Your President is a charming personality. I am very pleased to have had this opportunity of meeting him. My only regret is I could not see him earlier.' De Valera said: 'I hope that in the near future freedom and happiness will come to the Indian people.'

Netaji and de Valera were to meet again two years later in January 1938, this time in London. During a two-month visit to Europe from November 1937 to January 1938, Netaji had finally been allowed entry into Britain, and de Valera happened to come to London in January 1938 to hold talks with the British government after taking steps that turned the Free State into a de facto republic in December 1937. When they met in London in mid-January of 1938, Subhas Chandra Bose was the president-designate of the Indian National Congress, the incoming *rashtrapati* to countless millions of freedom-seeking Indians. In a letter on 16 January 1938, Netaji wrote: 'Had a meeting with de Valera last night. We had a long talk.'

Netaji had a packed schedule during his week in Dublin in February 1936. He held meetings with senior members of de Valera's cabinet: with Mr Ryan, the agriculture minister, on how to improve Indian agriculture and about the jute-growers of Bengal in particular, and with Mr Lemass, the minister of industry and commerce, about establishing trade relations between Ireland and India once freedom was achieved. [*Sean Lemass, 1899-1971, would go on to be the Republic of Ireland's Taoiseach, or prime minister, from 1959 to 1966. In 1959, Lemass succeeded de Valera as prime minister, and de Valera became Ireland's president, a largely ceremonial position he held until 1973. As prime minister, Lemass began the modernization of Ireland by opening up the country to the rest of Europe and spurring industrial growth through foreign investment in the economy. Lemass had fought as a teenager in the 1916 Easter Rising, armed with a shotgun, and as an IRA fighter during the War of Independence he was a member of the hit squad organized by Michael Collins which assassinated fourteen British agents in Dublin on a Sunday morning in November 1920. Ed.*]

Netaji also met Sean O'Kelly, the vice president, and they discussed faculty exchanges between Irish and Indian universities. In a meeting with William Norton, who was the leader of the Irish Labour Party from 1932 to 1960 and was to be the



*Tánaiste* or deputy prime minister of the Republic of Ireland from 1948 to 1951 and again from 1954 to 1957, the trade union movements of the two countries were discussed. Netaji visited the *Dail*, the Irish parliament, and watched the proceedings from the 'strangers' gallery'. And he attended a session of the city government of Dublin at the invitation of its mayor, who was very glad to receive a former mayor of Calcutta.

In the midst of all this hectic activity, he gave a newspaper interview on the present condition and the future emancipation of Indian women. It is no exaggeration to say that Subhas Chandra Bose was treated like the visiting plenipotentiary of an independent country during his visit to Ireland in early 1936. He must have felt happy when he departed Ireland on another American ship, the *President Harding*.

Some of Netaji's later exploits carry echoes of Irish precedents. For example, his phenomenally successful mobilization of the Indian diaspora in southeast Asia from 1943 to 1945. After a famous escape from prison in England in February 1919 [see the relevance of that escape to Netaji's historic escape from India in 1941 in the 'Note' at the end of this article, ed.], de Valera went to the United States in June 1919 and spent a year and a half there – until his return to war-torn Ireland in December 1920 – mobilizing the Irish-American diaspora and raising funds. Then again, Netaji's proclamation of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind (Free India) in Singapore in October 1943 was preceded by twenty-seven years by the proclamation of the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic during the 1916 Easter Rising. That proclamation was read from Dublin's General Post Office (GPO), which had been taken over by the revolutionaries, by Padraig (Patrick) Pearse, a well-known poet. All seven signatories of the proclamation of Irish independence were among the fifteen men executed by the British after the Rising; Patrick and his younger brother Willie were among the fifteen. [These executions, which sharply shifted Irish public opinion towards the rebels, were a major British blunder, on par with their decision to put INA officers on trial at the Red Fort in late 1945. Ed.]

Netaji's decision to seek aid from Germany and to lead an 'Indian Legion' comprised of Indian POWs in Germany also had an Irish precedent during World War I. The Irish revolutionaries had sought German support, especially weapons, for the Easter Rising. The most prominent figure in that effort was Sir Roger Casement (1864–1916). Casement had worked for many years as a senior diplomatic official of the British government and been knighted for his contributions in 1911 – hence 'Sir' Roger. When World War I broke out in mid-1914, he was in the United States, canvassing support for Irish freedom. He immediately travelled to Germany, where he solicited support from the German government and tried to raise an 'Irish Brigade' from Irish POWs taken by the Germans. Just before the Easter Rising, he secretly



travelled from Germany to Ireland by a German U-boat submarine, in a small version of the epic three-month submarine voyage from Germany to East Asia Netaji would undertake in 1943.

Casement was captured, charged with treason, and executed by hanging in north London's Pentonville prison in August 1916. This is the same prison where Madan Lal Dhingra was hanged in 1909, and Shaheed Udham Singh – who took revenge in London in 1940 for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre by assassinating Michael O'Dwyer, the Anglo-Irish official who had been Punjab's governor in 1919 – was hanged in 1940. [*O'Dwyer was from County Tipperary in Ireland's south, a stronghold of the independence fighters from 1919 to 1921. Ed.*] Dhingra and Udham Singh's mortal remains were brought back to India in the mid-1970s. Casement's remains were brought back to Ireland in 1965, after much effort by the Irish government. [*In 1953, Winston Churchill rudely refused a personal request by de Valera, the prime minister of Ireland, to return the remains. Ed.*] Casement lay in state in Dublin for five days and was then buried alongside other heroes of Irish freedom at a state funeral attended by de Valera, by then Ireland's president, and tens of thousands of others.

In the second half of 1943, rural Bengal was gripped by a devastating famine, brought on by British wartime policies. By spring 1944, three to four million of Bengal's sixty million people died from hunger, according to scholars such as Amartya Sen and Paul Greenough, who have studied the famine deeply. As a thirteen-year-old living in an upper middle-class area of south Calcutta, I saw long columns of emaciated men and women clad in rags, stick-thin and naked children and infants in tow, staggering along the streets begging for morsels of food. Hundreds of thousands of these starving villagers died on Calcutta's roads, curled up on pavements or collapsed in gutters. I witnessed this horror unfold before my eyes, day after day and week after week, for several months. The colonial government did absolutely nothing to alleviate the situation.

In September 1971, I was doing some research along with Sisir in the India Office Library in London. I found documents which show that in August 1943, when the famine was still in its early stages, Netaji – who was then based in Singapore – became very concerned and communicated to the British government that he wanted to send emergency supplies of rice by ship from Burma (then occupied by the Japanese) to Bengal. He asked for an assurance that these relief ships would not be attacked. The documents show that the British were desperate to ensure that news of the offer did not reach the public in India.

The Bengal famine of 1943–1944 touched a deep chord in Ireland. The Irish famine of 1845–1849 – similarly the direct result of British colonial rule – had killed one million of Ireland's then eight million people and led many more to emigrate to

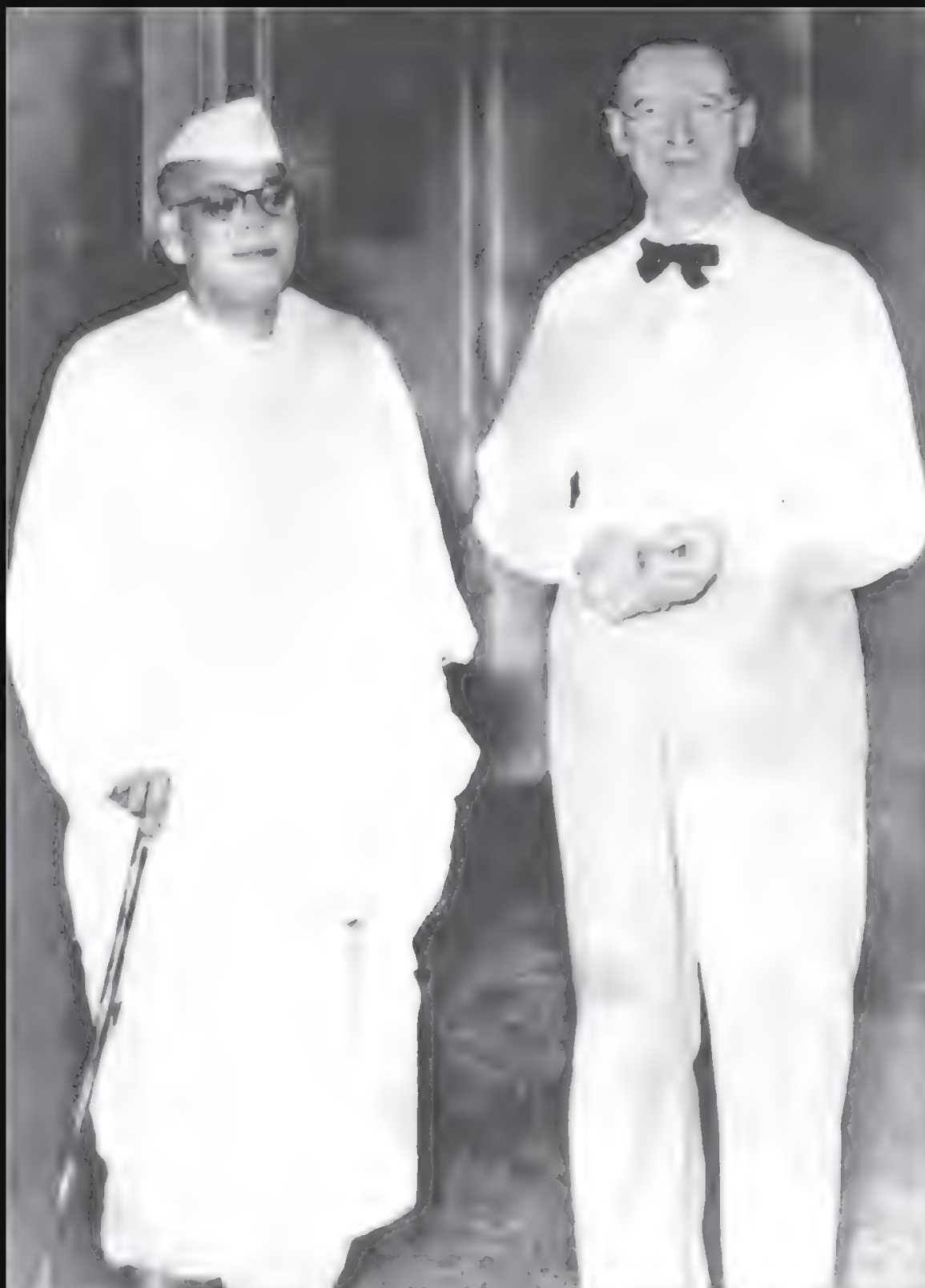


the United States. It was also the event that galvanized Irish nationalism, and implanted a deep-seated determination among the Irish – especially the survivors who went to the United States and organized politically there – to end the curse of British rule over Ireland. Although Ireland was itself a relatively poor country, de Valera's government offered to send food to Bengal through the Irish Red Cross. This was very difficult in the midst of a raging World War, but Netaji was deeply touched when he heard about it. In one of his radio broadcasts from Southeast Asia, he thanked the people and government of Ireland for their empathy and concern.

When Netaji declared the Provisional Government of Azad Hind in Singapore on 21 October 1943, he received greetings and messages of support from Ireland – though not at the official level, because Ireland was formally neutral in the war. In a radio broadcast, Netaji thanked the Irish compatriots and recalled the proclamation of the provisional government of the Irish Republic in Dublin in April 1916. He also recalled that the British had managed to partition Ireland and foresaw a similar danger looming in India. He said in the broadcast: 'Our cause is just. Our demand is for our birthright. We are prepared to pay the price. We shall therefore triumph. Freedom will come.' The last sentence repeated the wording of the telegram the MacSwiney family of Cork had sent to Calcutta on hearing of Jatin Das's martyrdom in 1929.

## Notes

*The Bose connection with Ireland was revived in December 1948, when Sarat Chandra Bose, his wife Bivabati and their son Sisir visited Dublin during a tour of many European countries as well as Britain (London). They were received by Eamon de Valera at the Dail, the Irish parliament (de Valera had already met Sarat Bose in Calcutta in June 1948, during a trip to India). When Sisir told de Valera about the radio broadcast Netaji had made from Southeast Asia in which he thanked the Irish for the offer of help to the victims of the Bengal famine, de Valera was very excited. He had not known of this broadcast, and asked Sisir to send him its full text if possible. Sean O'Kelly, who had met Netaji in February 1936 as vice president, was now the president of Ireland and hosted them at the presidential residence, where he showed them around. Maud Gonne MacBride hosted them at her home. She met Sarat Bose after thirty-five years – in 1913, Sarat, after qualifying as a barrister in London, had visited her in Paris, where she was then living in exile.*



Eamon de Valera with Sarat Chandra Bose in Calcutta, 1948





Eamon de Valera in Dublin, December 1948. A portrait taken by Sisir Bose.

*In early December of 1940, Netaji asked his nephew Sisir, then twenty years old, to assist his escape from India. As they plotted the escape from Calcutta together, Sisir thought it would be a good idea to read up on other historic escapes, particularly Eamon de Valera's escape from the prison in the city of Lincoln in England in 1919, in which Michael Collins was closely involved. At about 1:30 a.m. on the night of 16-17 January 1941, Sisir drove his uncle out of the family mansion at 38/2 Elgin Road en route to the Gomoh station, 320 kilometres from Calcutta and forty kilometres beyond*

*Dhanbad in Bihar (now Jharkhand), from where Netaji boarded the Delhi-Kalka Mail the following night before taking the Frontier Mail to Peshawar.*

*During the overnight drive out of Calcutta on 16-17 January 1941, the uncle and nephew chatted constantly. Netaji sat in the back seat of the car – a German-made 1937 Wanderer now exhibited in the driveway of Netaji Bhawan – but kept talking with Sisir and pouring him hot coffee from a flask. To Sisir's surprise, at one point Netaji asked him if he knew the story of de Valera's 1919 escape. Sisir replied that he did and briefly recounted it. See Sisir Kumar Bose, Subhas and Sarat: An Intimate Memoir of the Bose Brothers (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2016). Ed.*



Azad Hind

Netaji's Epic Struggle in Europe and Asia, 1941–1945

## ABID HASAN'S EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT

*Abid Hasan (1911–1984) was one of Netaji's closest associates from 1941 to 1945. He joined Netaji's struggle in May 1941, a month after Netaji arrived in Berlin following the historic escape from India that began in January 1941. He was one of the first civilians to enlist in the Indian Legion, a military force drawn mainly from Indian prisoners of war taken by the Germans in North Africa. During Netaji's epic submarine voyage over three months from Europe to East Asia between February and May of 1943, Abid Hasan was his sole Indian companion. In Asia, he was with his leader in Tokyo, Singapore, Rangoon, Nanking and Shanghai, almost like a shadow. In 1944, Abid Hasan fought with distinction on the Imphal front as an officer of the Indian National Army. On 17 August 1945, a handful of senior INA officers and ministers of the Provisional Government of Free India, proclaimed by Netaji in Singapore on 21 October 1943, saw Netaji off at Saigon airport on his last journey. Abid Hasan was one of them. Thus, Abid Hasan is a unique source of information on Netaji's struggle to liberate India from 1941 to 1945. The article that follows is based on a lengthy tape-recorded interview I conducted with Abid Hasan in Calcutta in 1976.*

– Krishna Bose

When I heard that Abid Hasan was coming to Calcutta for a few days in March 1976 and would as usual be staying with us, I immediately made a resolution. This time, I would extract his detailed reminiscences from him and record them for history. Abid Hasan had narrated a lot of his memories to us during his previous visits to Calcutta, for example when he came to Netaji Bhawan in January 1970 to deliver the NRB's 'Netaji Oration' on 23 January on the subject of the INA's heroic retreat from Manipur to Burma in 1944. At that time, he had just retired from a distinguished post-independence career in the Indian Foreign Service; his last posting was as ambassador to Denmark. [During his IFS career, Abid Hasan mostly worked in the Middle East – he was ambassador to Egypt and also served in Syria and Iraq. Ed.] During the storytelling sessions on the south-facing verandah of our residence, 1 Woodburn Park – the house built by my father-in-law Sarat Chandra Bose in 1927 – I urged him to write down his memories. Lounging in his cane chair on the verandah, he promised me he would, now that he had retired. He was setting up a farm and orchard just outside Hyderabad, his native city, after retirement. He said Sisir and I would visit him there and we would record his memories. But that opportunity hadn't yet arisen, six years later.

This time, Abid Hasan arrived at our new residence – Basundhara, 90 Sarat Bose



Road, a house we had bought in March 1974 when 1 Woodburn Park was designated a heritage building and public institution by the government of West Bengal. He arrived bearing a basket of grapes from his orchard. He then said, with his typical impish smile, that he hadn't written anything down and the grapes were *nazrana* (a gift) to compensate my disappointment. The grapes were delicious, but I wasn't fully mollified.

On his first day in Calcutta, he didn't stay with us. He had been invited to give a talk in the city, and was put up by his hosts at a five-star hotel. But as soon as that obligation was done, he would check out and come to stay with us. I arranged a room for him on the ground floor of our two-storeyed house. On the wall, I put up a large-size photograph of Netaji speaking at the Greater East Asia Conference in Tokyo in November 1943, where Abid Hasan had accompanied him. The photograph was a gift from Madame Tojo – the widow of Hideki Tojo, Japan's wartime prime minister (until 1944), who had been very supportive of Netaji when he arrived in East Asia in mid-1943. It was even signed by Madame Tojo in the Japanese script. On one side of the room, I arranged a large black sofa for us to sit on for the interview, with a glass table in front for the recording equipment. I knew that Abid Hasan isn't a natural public speaker. But I also knew that as a storyteller in an intimate setting, he can be spellbinding. My expectations were not belied.

But that came later. As soon as he stepped into our house, Abid Hasan announced that he was very hungry and demanded to eat. I was a bit baffled because he had been staying at the city's top luxury hotel, renowned for its cuisine. He told me the prices had scared him off. But, I said to him, you were someone's guest; they would be paying and not you. He replied that that was the problem. He wouldn't have minded paying for himself, but had balked at inflicting the exorbitant prices on his hosts. He said: 'Krishnaji, you know I need tea constantly. Well, this hotel charges so much for a pot of tea that I didn't even order tea.'

Then Abid Hasan dug into a Bengali lunch at the oval-shaped marble dining table – which had once belonged to Sarat Bose and come with us from Woodburn Park to our new house – in our first-floor dining room. We had prepared *pabda machher jhol* (a traditional fish in gravy) for the family lunch that day. Abid Hasan ate two huge *pabda* fish with relish, nimbly using a knife and fork to pick the fish from the bones. I realized he really was hungry. He then told me that he did not wish to eat any meat during his stay with us – just fish, cooked in Bengali style. Sitting at our dining table, he recalled what he had once said to Netaji while eating fish together at the dining table of Netaji's residence on Singapore's Meyer Road in 1943. He told Netaji that it was difficult to figure out Netaji's Bengali origins from his appearance and manners, but he gave his roots in Bengal away in one context. 'What is that?'



Netaji asked in some surprise. 'When you tuck into a fish delicacy,' Abid Hasan told him.

## **Berlin, 1941**

Our conversation began with Abid Hasan's first-ever meeting with Netaji. This happened in Berlin, sometime in early 1936. Subhas Chandra Bose was visiting the city and Abid Hasan was studying engineering there. There were many Indian students in Berlin at that time and they were all thrilled to meet the young, charismatic leader of the Indian freedom struggle. Abid Hasan, a twenty-four-year-old from Hyderabad, was no exception. But it was no more than a passing acquaintance at that point. Abid Hasan did not wish to inflict his company on the famous 'Subhas-babu' and kept a discreet distance. Once World War II broke out in September 1939, Abid Hasan was stuck in Germany like many other Indian students in Europe. He and his close friend 'Gopu' [*the nickname of N. G. Swami, later the chief of the INA's intelligence service in Southeast Asia, ed.*] would often get together in Berlin and discuss how to contribute to India's freedom struggle. [*Abid Hasan was from a nationalist family and his mother, in particular, was strongly opposed to British imperialism and colonial rule. Before going to Germany, he had spent time at Mahatma Gandhi's ashram in Sabarmati, Gujarat. Ed.*] But they could not think of anything they could possibly do.

One day in May 1941, Gopu told Abid that an Italian gentleman, recently arrived in Berlin, was very interested in India's struggle for freedom. Abid Hasan was sceptical. He told Gopu that the man was likely a fraud. But Gopu was keen to meet the Italian, and eventually Abid agreed, reluctantly, to accompany his friend. He asked Gopu what the man's name was and Gopu said he was known as 'His Excellency Orlando Mazzotta'. His Excellency my foot, Abid Hasan said. He was more convinced than ever that the man was a fake Italian count.

Abid Hasan remembers a rather large house, and a long drawing room. At the far end of the room, a man was seated at a table. As Abid entered, the man rose and came towards him. From that moment, Abid Hasan does not recall any details of the room, or even Gopu's presence. As the man approached, a stammering gasp came out of Abid Hasan's mouth: 'S-U-B-H-A-S-B-A-B-U!' He has never been so stunned in his life. [*Just after mid-March 1941, after being stuck in Kabul for six weeks, Netaji commenced his journey from the Afghan capital to Germany via the Soviet Union. He was disguised as Orlando Mazzotta, a fictitious Italian, and travelled under that fake identity. The Italian embassy in Kabul – particularly the ambassador, Pietro Quaroni – were of great help. Netaji arrived in Berlin at the beginning of April 1941 and kept up the Mazzotta ruse for months after his arrival. Ed.*]





Netaji in Berlin, April 1941. He is disguised as Orlando Mazzotta, a fictitious Italian identity he used to travel from Kabul to Berlin via the Soviet Union.

Netaji asked Abid Hasan to sit on a sofa, and ordered tea. Sensing Abid's shock, he made small talk at first. 'This Tiergarten area of Berlin is really nice, isn't it?' he said. Then he gradually broached other subjects. He asked Abid what he thought of

the present political situation in India. Abid Hasan was stunned once again. Here was Subhas Chandra Bose, asking for his views on India's political situation. He was tongue-tied and simply replied: 'Sir!'

But Netaji was genuinely interested in Abid Hasan's views, and in his background. He asked gently about his past and Abid told him that he had participated in the Congress's *satyagraha* campaigns, been arrested and jailed, and that he had spent some time in Gandhiji's Sabarmati ashram. Then Netaji said to him: '*Aap to hamara saath hai, na?*' (You are with us, right?)

At that time, Abid Hasan was working as a translator at Radio Berlin. He wasn't studying any longer and was quite hard up for money. Without a second thought, he quit his job and soon became a full-time worker of the Free India Centre in Berlin led by Netaji. Both he and Gopu also joined the Indian Legion and took rigorous military training from Wehrmacht instructors. That training proved invaluable when in mid-1944, Abid Hasan was sent to the Imphal front when the INA was facing adverse circumstances. Gopu, like Abid, had come to Germany for higher studies before the war and both men came to hold the military rank of Major in the Indian National Army. Gopu – Major N. G. Swami – and a few others were trained in intelligence, counter-intelligence and espionage in Germany, including advanced radio communications. A couple of months after Netaji and Abid Hasan left Germany for East Asia by submarine (U-boat) in early February 1943, Gopu and his team followed them in a 'blockade-runner' ship and reached Singapore after a six-week journey. Under Major Swami's direction, some of these men then travelled by submarine to India as secret agents in advance of the INA's thrust into northeast India in March 1944. One such operative, codenamed 'Rao', arrived in Calcutta in end-December 1943 and made contact with Sisir, who then put him in touch with members of the 'Bengal Volunteers' (BV) underground revolutionary group.

Netaji's presence in Berlin was inspirational and fired the Indian expatriate community, especially the youths, with energy and resolve. The Free India Centre soon buzzed with activity and there were constant meetings, debates and discussions. The Azad Hind Radio was created to broadcast to India [*Sisir Bose used to listen to it in Calcutta, ed.*] and the Indian Legion was infused with fresh energy. There was much excitement over the prospect of the Axis Powers supporting a statement in favour of Indian independence. [*This did not materialize because Hitler, who was obsessed with his war on the Russians and the Soviet Union, refused as he did not want to excessively alienate Britain. Ed.*] One day early on, Abid Hasan recalls, Netaji called all the activists together and explained in detail why he had left India and come to wartime Europe. Netaji said the Indian freedom struggle had reached a critical point and the British chokehold on India would not crumble without an



armed strike. Without some external help, it was not possible for Indians to prepare and launch such an armed strike. The world war presented a golden opportunity for India to secure assistance from Britain's enemies for such an endeavour, which must not be lost. Abid Hasan says that Netaji's optimism against all odds and his belief in the inevitability of India's liberation was contagious and filled his followers with hope and confidence.

Netaji initially felt that the Indian students who had joined him in Germany should concentrate on political and diplomatic work. But Abid Hasan was keen on acquiring military training. He told Netaji that when the time came to enter India, it would be useful for some highly educated, politically indoctrinated youths to accompany the professional soldiers. The military and political aspects were not separate at all, Hasan argued. Netaji accepted this argument and it was decided that Abid Hasan and some of the other students would receive military training. Jubilant, Abid started to neglect his everyday work at the Free India Centre. A fun-loving person, he was determined to enjoy himself a bit before starting his army life. Berlin had quite a reputation in the 1930s for its vibrancy and night life, which had survived even after the war began. Abid Hasan loved this aspect of Berlin and decided to indulge himself before the rigours and discipline of army life took over. He would foist his work at the Free India Centre on hapless colleagues like M. R. Vyas while he frequented Berlin's cafes, restaurants and clubs.

But he soon turned serious again. Abid Hasan was assigned to visit the Indian POW camps to interact with the POWs there. The objective was to recruit as many as possible for the Indian Legion. Annaburg, a small town in eastern Germany, had a sizeable POW camp. There Hasan encountered a complex situation. Some of the soldiers said they had eaten the *namak* (salt) of the British masters, so changing sides would be treachery. Others cited the *kasam* (promise) of loyalty they had made on joining the British-Indian army, sometimes on Hindu, Muslim or Sikh holy texts. Yet others were concerned about reprisals against their families in India. Some, having recently fought the Germans in North Africa for the British, were just puzzled by the prospect of the enemy becoming a friend. Abid Hasan took everything in and reported back to Netaji in Berlin without hiding or glossing anything over.



Netaji in the garden of his residence in Berlin, 1942

It was decided that Netaji would personally visit the Annaburg camp and speak to the soldiers. The soldiers assembled in a public hall outside the camp premises. Netaji arrived and as soon as he started speaking from the dais, something peculiar happened. Someone coughed in one corner of the hall and on cue, someone else coughed on the hall's other side. The synchronized coughing then spread to different parts of the hall. Netaji simply ignored the disturbance and spoke for nearly an hour amid the chorus of coughing. Abid Hasan observed that only a small



minority of the audience, who had deliberately taken seats in different parts of the hall, were trying to throw Netaji off balance and disrupt his speech. The vast majority kept quiet and listened. But he was still very embarrassed that Netaji had had to face such a situation. In his own mind, Abid gave up any hope of influencing the men in the Annaburg camp.

It had been decided that after the address, Netaji would inspect the camp and interact informally with the soldiers. Netaji was adamant that he would do so. It was then decided that no German officers would accompany Netaji into the camp. Netaji would make the camp visit accompanied by a few Indians – Abid Hasan, Gurmukh Singh, Gurbachan Singh and a handful of others.

At the main entrance, a few non-commissioned officers (NCOs) tried to block Netaji's path. There were no commissioned officers among the camp population and it was these NCOs who exercised authority over the ordinary soldiers. They created a ruckus, yelling: '*Tum kaun ho, nikalo yahaanse, jan ka parwa hai to nikal jao.*' (Who are you, get out of here, get out if you value your life.)

Netaji, unperturbed, brushed past them and walked into the camp with a calm expression on his face. Abid Hasan and the others were emboldened by his calmness and followed him in. Then, a sudden transformation occurred. To his amazement, Abid Hasan heard slogans: '*Subhasbabu ki jai, Subhasbabu zindabad!*' (Victory to Subhasbabu, long live Subhasbabu!) The ordinary soldiers flocked to Netaji in droves and gave him a tumultuous welcome. They had prepared garlands for him made from tree leaves and pieces of coloured paper. Other slogans rent the air: '*Gandhiji ki jai, Hindustan zindabad!*' (Victory to Gandhiji, long live India!) The atmosphere was such that for a moment Abid Hasan felt he was back in India. When he recalled the experience to us, he kept saying: 'It was wonderful, wonderful!'

While Netaji was being feted inside the camp, Abid slipped out and spoke urgently to the German officers in charge of the camp. He told them that the handful of troublemakers should be removed forthwith from the camp; otherwise, they would go to work again on the inmates once Netaji left. But the German officers in charge of the camp did not have the authority to do this, without orders from a higher level. The troublemakers were removed from the camp after a few days, once Netaji spoke to authorities in Berlin. But in the meantime, these elements managed to again sow doubts in the minds of some of the men, mainly by telling them that the British government would punish their families back in India.

Abid Hasan was disappointed but Netaji was unfazed. He told Abid that the struggle required people of resolute, steadfast character. For this, it was necessary to separate the wheat from the chaff. Individuals who wavered and changed their minds repeatedly were of no use to the struggle. Now that such elements had been



identified, those who had remained steadfast could be relied on to serve the struggle with loyalty and devotion. There was no reason to feel discouraged.

### **The Indian Legion**

Abid Hasan drank large quantities of tea as our conversation progressed, and chain-smoked cigarettes. Occasionally, he asked for a cold beer. Next, I asked him to tell us about how the Indian Legion was built up, organized and trained. After all, this was the first Azad Hind Fauj, formed in Europe in 1941. Sipping his beer, he said: 'I can only tell you about my personal experiences, Krishna.' Of course. We were all agog.

A small number of student volunteers, Hasan included, joined the Indian Legion's training camp at a place called Meseritz. The Germans had proposed two alternative models for the training to the Free India Centre, and asked that the Centre choose one. In the first model, all members of the Indian Legion – whether from the POWs or civilian volunteers – would be treated as raw recruits. No Indians would have officer rank at first. The POWs would have to forget their former ranks. As the training progressed, the most dedicated and deserving recruits would be promoted and the Legion's rank structure would take shape. The Germans were confident that if this formula was followed, a first-rate fighting force would be created in a few months. But alternatively, the Free India Centre could decide to appoint the trainees to various ranks at the outset if it so wished. In that case, the Germans would provide the military training and stay away from the embryonic force's internal organization and structure.



Netaji with the first officers of the Indian Legion in Germany, 1942



Netaji was placed in a dilemma. An Indian force with no Indian officers at first? That sounded odd, and might also be fodder for British propaganda. But after detailed discussions, the Centre decided to accept the first model. It was felt that under that model, the training would be as rigorous as it could possibly be and those fittest to lead would emerge naturally from the process.

After two months of hard training, the Wehrmacht officer-in-charge selected thirty trainees for the first 'promotion test'. Those successful would be promoted to lance-naik. The test had two parts: theory and practicals. Abid Hasan was enjoying the training and was eager to get promoted. Being proficient in German, he also acted as the camp's translator, into Urdu, of the instructions and commands given in German during training. He aced the theory test easily. But the practical part proved more challenging.

During this session of listening to Abid Hasan, there were four of us present in the room. In addition to myself and Sisir, there were two others: our elder son Sugata, nineteen, and a history student at university, and Rabindra Kumar Ghosh, an older cousin of Sisir's on his mother's side. Mr Ghosh is mainly known as 'Rabibabu' but Sisir and I call him 'Dantida' (his family nickname is 'Danti'). A sprightly seventy-year-old, he has been a great friend to Sisir for decades and is a devoted member of Netaji Research Bureau. Abid Hasan surveyed us solemnly and asked each of us to guess how many of the thirty managed to pass the practical test. I guessed ten, Sugata said fifteen. Dantida said twenty. Sisir thought it was no more than five.

Abid Hasan said, with a glint in his eye and an impish grin: Well, all of you are wrong. We all failed.

Why? On the day of the test, the German trainers handed the Indians their weapons and live ammunition, and asked them to simulate an attack on an enemy target. They explained where and how the enemy was positioned, what weapons they had, and their numerical strength. Abid Hasan was designated the leader of a ten-man assault group. On command, the group charged forward to attack. So far so good. But then the head trainer made a sound and told Hasan: 'You are dead, you have been shot dead.' Now what? The group was stunned and did not know what to do next.

That was the lesson the trainers wanted to impart. It would just not do for disarray to set in if the commander got killed. Abid Hasan should have designated at least one and preferably more members of his group to take over and lead the attack in that eventuality. It was a basic error to have not done so. For the next test, Hasan chose and briefed four from his team to continue the attack amid casualties. This time, there were no simple mistakes and all thirty men passed.



At the end of the training, Abid Hasan was promoted to the rank of Corporal. The evening before the formal promotion, he did a dress rehearsal of sorts in front of a large mirror in the barracks. He knew the Germans were very particular about smartness, so he checked his uniform was in perfect condition and worn correctly, and once again practised putting on his cap at the proper angle. He had heard about the lengths to which German troops could go at the front to appear presentable during visits and inspections by senior officers. One story went that lacking hot water to shave, some soldiers used the mug of coffee each had received in the morning to shave before an inspection. Standing upright in front of the mirror, Abid then started to practise how to salute. In the German army, ordinary soldiers were supposed to salute even a corporal as a superior, and he felt he needed to practise how to return the salute. At that moment, the head trainer happened to pass by and on seeing what Abid was doing, gave him some good advice. The essence of the advice was that Abid should always counter-salute the soldiers serving under him with the same sincerity and respect he saluted his own superiors. The German officer warned Abid that now that he was superior in rank to most of the other trainees, some of them might harbour resentment. In the German military's tradition, freshly promoted men were usually transferred immediately to a unit other than the one they had trained with to avoid this problem. But in the case of the Indian Legion, a small-sized force, that was not very feasible. So, the way to win the hearts of his peers turned subordinates would be to show them respect and treat them as equals, starting with the saluting behaviour.

It was simple advice but Abid Hasan recalled how sound it was when, in mid-1944, he was sent from the INA forward headquarters at Rangoon to the Imphal front to revitalize and lead some of the INA units fighting in difficult conditions. By then, he held the rank of Major in the Indian National Army. Major Hasan, of civilian background, was very effective at the front because he was able to quickly build a relationship of reciprocal trust and respect with the soldiers, most of whom were from a British-Indian army background.

The British-Indian army background of the vast majority of the Indian Legion's soldiers caused some other problems. Back in India, these men were used to having others – people of very 'low' social status – sweep their barracks and clean their toilets. In wartime Germany, that was not possible. But because of habit, they balked at doing these everyday 'menial' tasks, which conflicted with their sense of pride. They told Hasan: *'Kya humko bhangi bana diya? Netaji ke liye hum shīr dene ke liye taiyar hai, jaan dene ke liye taiyar hai, lekin jharu pakarne ke liye taiyar nahin hai.'* (Have you turned us into scavengers? We are ready to give our heads and our lives for Netaji, but we are not ready to wield brooms.)



The handful of legionnaires who were ex-students, led by Hasan, then took on the daily chore of sweeping the barracks and cleaning the toilets. The soldiers watched in silence. After a week, a few joined in, and after another week a few more. Then all the men did. The issue was resolved.

A bigger problem arose with kitchens and eating habits. In the British-Indian army, regiments were organized by region and ethnicity: Punjab Regiment, Dogra Regiment, Garhwal Regiment, Maratha Regiment and so on. Provincialism and sectarianism were deeply embedded in the British-Indian army and indeed were intrinsic to its existence and functioning. In the Indian National Army in Southeast Asia, and before that, in the much smaller Indian Legion in Europe, every unit, regardless of its size, was mixed and contained soldiers of different faiths and regions. But that was not the end of the problem. In the British-Indian army, soldiers of different religions were used to having separate kitchens and eating separately even when they belonged to the same formation (for example, the Punjab Regiment). In the Indian Legion, Hasan found, the Sikh soldiers would only eat 'jhatka' meat (where the animal has been killed by just one blow or strike) in accordance with their tradition, and the Muslim soldiers would only eat meat where the animal had been slaughtered following 'halal' procedures. So at mealtimes, the Sikhs and the Muslims would line up in separate queues, to be served from different counters – one the jhatka counter and the other the halal counter. The jhatka-halal divide became a major headache for Hasan. From Berlin, Netaji was insistent that kitchens and eating had to be integrated.

Abid Hasan knew what a sensitive matter this was. He narrated his own experience of overcoming eating taboos as an example. He first met Gopu (N. G. Swamī), who became his close friend, by chance at a cafeteria in Berlin when they were both students. Abid entered the cafeteria and spotted another young Indian seated at a table, eating. Abid nodded to the stranger, gave him a smile and made to go over and join him at the table. Normally, young Indians in Berlin were very happy to encounter each other. But this man gave him a look of such deep distaste that Abid was shocked. Quite offended, Abid turned around and walked out of the cafeteria.

Shortly afterwards, Abid encountered Gopu again through a common friend. Abid Hasan was still smarting from the peculiar cafeteria experience and was very stiff and formal. Gopu and the other friend both seemed puzzled by Abid's behaviour. Finally, Abid told Gopu that he had been put off by his rudeness when they had run into each other in the cafeteria. Gopu burst out laughing and said: 'Oh, that! Sorry, I was eating beef for the first time in my life.' The mystery of Gopu's distorted facial expression was solved.

Abid Hasan told us: 'At least Gopu had the guts to try out beef in a public place –



when I tried ham for the first time, I did it in the privacy of my room and vomited afterwards.'

Abid Hasan said to us: 'Unlike Gopu and me, well-educated people, our soldiers were simple men from villages, born into and deeply attached to their particular traditions. Also, Gopu and I were experimenting with overcoming our taboos of our own volition; no one had told or compelled us to do so.'

But the jhatka-halal matter had to be tackled. As a first step, the two separate queues and counters were abolished. One queue and counter were instituted. At the counter, the jhatka and halal meat were kept in separate utensils, and each soldier was asked which they wanted. This arrangement did not cause any problems.

Then, a rather crafty scheme was put into operation. The meat in both utensils was cut up into some big and some small pieces. When the soldiers queued up, the servers were tutored in advance to start off by serving the big pieces from one utensil and the small pieces from the other utensil, alternating between the jhatka and halal vessels on different days. After a few days, it became apparent that more and more soldiers further back in the queue were opting to be served from the utensil which contained the big pieces. Many jhatka-wallahs were pointing to the halal utensil, and vice versa. The taboo was broken.

Still, there were a small number of individuals who would not put appetite over custom. These men were granted a short leave from the camp, to go and enjoy themselves. They were delighted at the opportunity and went off happily. When they came back, there was not just one counter but one giant utensil from which all the soldiers were being served their meat. No one raised any objections.

The integration achieved caused problems later on. Towards the end of the war in Europe, the Indian Legion soldiers were taken prisoner and, as former British-Indian army personnel, turned over to the British. When the British tried to divide them into separate Hindu, Muslim and Sikh groups, they strongly protested. In one POW camp, Abid Hasan heard, the British captors opened fire on them during a protest.

The Indian Legion's camps had places of worship set aside for its soldiers. Soldiers could pray individually or together at a congregational centre of their choice – a small temple or mosque or gurdwara or church. But once the spirit of unity took hold, some soldiers – mostly Sikhs – approached Abid Hasan with a proposal. They felt the soldiers could pray together, rather than in separate groups. Hasan was delighted.

The soldiers then sat together and composed a prayer to be offered jointly to the Almighty. Instead of Ishwar–Allah, Ram–Rahim and so on, they used the word *Malik* (Master or Lord), as in the Urdu *duniya ke malik* (lord of the universe). It was a



beautiful composition. Written by men from villages, it had a simplicity and charm that reminded Hasan of the compositions of Kabir, the fifteenth-century mystic. We excitedly asked Abid Hasan to recite it for us. To our surprise, he replied that he had forgotten. He then said there was a reason why he had forgotten, which he would shortly tell us.

It was decided that the men would recite the prayer in unison the next time Netaji visited the camp. When such a visit was announced, the soldiers practised hard to get it right.

When Netaji arrived from Berlin, Abid Hasan told him: 'Sir, we have a surprise for you.' Netaji replied: 'I don't like surprises.' By this time, he was familiar with Abid's penchant for jokes and pranks, and probably anticipated something of that nature.

At the end of the visit, the soldiers stood in front of Netaji and proudly recited their common prayer together in one voice. Netaji showed no reaction, but everyone was convinced that he must be very pleased at this display of unity.

After a little while, Abid Hasan was summoned to meet Netaji in private in a room in the officers' mess. This was not in itself unusual; Netaji would speak privately to Hasan to give instructions and advice during these visits. Having the one-to-one meetings in the officers' mess was slightly sensitive for protocol because Abid Hasan was not of officer rank. But as he worked as a *de facto* political commissar in the camp, the meetings were necessary. To get around the awkwardness, the Germans had proposed appointing Abid as an officer, but in the 'non-combatant' category, maybe as a translator. Abid refused the offer – he wanted a proper military commission. So Netaji would meet him in a small room in the officers' mess.

When Abid entered the room, Netaji said to him: 'What is this nonsense you have begun? What is this stunt?' He was referring to the common prayer. Abid was startled and taken aback. He had not expected such a reaction. Had Netaji not liked the composition of Kabirian beauty?

But Netaji's objection was not about the composition as such, but to the approach it represented. He told Abid with great firmness that this approach to uniting Indians was flawed and must be shunned. Religious faith, he told Abid, was a private matter for the individual and should not play any role whatsoever in their political movement. Indian nationalism should transcend religious identities and sentiments. It must *not*, Netaji emphasized, be grounded in a philosophy of interfaith solidarity or a narrative of religious syncretism. Netaji told Abid: 'By using religion to unite yourselves today, you are opening the door to someone else who will sow division tomorrow by using the same sentiments.'

Abid Hasan felt disappointed that their effort to impress Netaji had flopped so



badly, but over the next few years he realised that Netaji's position was sound. Through long political experience, Netaji had understood what a delicate matter religion was and how easily it could be exploited to stoke divisions and weaken the Indian nationalist movement, to the imperialists' advantage. Netaji's critique was eventually convincing to Abid because, as he got to know Netaji better and better, he realized that Netaji was himself a deeply spiritual person, but kept his religiosity and prayers strictly private. [In my book *Secular States, Religious Politics: India, Turkey, and the Future of Secularism*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2018, I have discussed this episode and offered a perspective: 'Bose's view is the polar opposite of Jinnah's, whose politics fused religion, nation and state. But it is also very different from Gandhi's, who jumped on the Khilafat bandwagon to promote Hindu-Muslim unity. Bose believed that the path to Indian unity lay in transcending rather than indulging religious affiliations and sentiments. Bose's conception of "secularism" was very different from Gandhi's, and much more robust than the later "Nehruvian" version'. Ed.]

Abid Hasan came to realize the limitations of the approach Netaji rejected from his own personal experiences as well. In the Indian Legion's barracks, Abid's two roommates were both Sikhs – living arrangements were organized so that men of different religious backgrounds were intermingled. At one point, Abid started to greet them on getting up every morning with 'Sat Sree Akaal'. He noticed that his roommates seemed somewhat discomfited by this, but thought that would pass once they got used to it. But it didn't. One day Gurmukh Singh, one of the two, said gently to Abid in a rather embarrassed tone: 'Bhai Abid, can I say something to you? Please don't greet us in that way.' Abid was stunned and indeed crestfallen. Then Gurmukh Singh explained: 'When you greet us like that, we feel we should say "salaam aleikum" in response. But try as we may, we are unable to bring ourselves to say *salaam aleikum*. We hope you understand.'

This little episode is of great significance. It was at that point that Abid Hasan started to think about a common greeting that all Indians could use with each other.

### **Jai Hind!**

Soon after Gurmukh Singh spoke to him, Abid visited Berlin, where he met with Netaji. He narrated the episode to Netaji and then told him, tongue in cheek: 'Sir, I have thought of a common form of greeting that will be acceptable to everyone.' Netaji was quite excited and asked: 'What is it?' Abid Hasan said: 'Hallo!' Netaji was not amused. He said: 'Hasan, this is a serious matter, not a joke.'

On returning to camp, Abid Hasan applied himself to finding a common, national



greeting. He started listening carefully to how the soldiers greeted each other. In addition to '*Sat Sree Akaal*' and '*Salaam Aleikum*', 'good morning' and 'good afternoon' were also in circulation. The rather bland '*Namaste*' was also heard, but rarely. None of the terms was satisfactory.

Then one day, Hasan noticed how the Rajput soldiers greeted each other: '*Jai Ramji ki!*' He liked it immediately – it felt natural and had a melodious quality. For the next few nights, Abid – from an aristocratic Hyderabad Muslim family – lay awake at night muttering '*Jai Ramji ki, Jai Ramji ki*' to himself.

Finally, he had an idea: How about '*Jai Hindustan ki*? But it didn't sound right, and was too long. How about '*Jai Hindustan*? No, that didn't sound right either. How about just '*Jai Hind*'? That didn't sound too bad – short and clean.

But Abid Hasan was still not sure. He decided to test it out on the Rajput soldiers. One day, he was socializing with them when someone said, '*Jai Ramji ki!*' Abid seized the opportunity and said: '*Arre, Jai Ramji ki to gaya zamana ka hai; abhi to Jai Hind bolna hai.*' (*Jai Ramji ki* is from the past; now we should say *Jai Hind*). The Rajputs liked the idea and said in unison: '*Han han, abhi to Jai Hind bolenge – Jai Hind! Jai Hind!*' (Yes, yes, that's what we will say now – *Jai Hind!*)

Abid Hasan departed forthwith to Berlin. He told Netaji he thought he had found the common national greeting: *Jai Hind!* Netaji immediately called M. R. Vyas and other Free India Centre workers in for a consultation. Subhas Chandra Bose, Vyas, Abid Hasan and the others kept saying '*Jai Hind*' to each other to get a sense and feel of how it sounded. Everyone liked it and '*Jai Hind*' was approved.

Whenever he got a chance to visit Berlin, Abid Hasan would always spend the night there – he had not given up his addiction to Berlin's nightlife. But on that day, he travelled back to the camp straightaway, in a state of great excitement. From the next day, '*Jai Hind*' became the standard greeting in the camp.

This was the origin of India's national slogan '*Jai Hind*' (Victory to India, or Long Live India). When tens of thousands of the INA's imprisoned soldiers were repatriated by the British from Southeast Asia to India in late 1945, '*Jai Hind*' became a national craze and India's cry for freedom. Later, Jawaharlal Nehru started using it at the end of his speeches, starting with his 'tryst with destiny' speech at midnight on 14–15 August 1947, and this became standard practice for Indian prime ministers when they address the nation from the Red Fort on 15 August, Independence Day. But during the Azad Hind movement in Southeast Asia under Netaji's leadership from 1943 to 1945, '*Jai Hind*' was not primarily used as a slogan but as an interpersonal greeting between freedom fighters bound in a common cause. It is often forgotten that '*Jai Hind*' emerged in wartime Europe and that it was coined by a young freedom fighter, Abid Hasan, who joined Subhas Chandra Bose's quest for



India's liberation there. [Since the mid-1990s, 'Jai Hind' is the standard form of greeting used in the Indian Army. Ed.]

Next, the matter of a national anthem came up. We knew that the Free India Centre in wartime Europe had adopted Tagore's '*Jana Gana Mana*' as India's national anthem, several years before the independent Indian state did so. We wanted to know first hand from Abid Hasan how this came about. We knew that a superb orchestral version of '*Jana Gana Mana*' was created by Ambik Mazumdar, the Free India Centre member in charge of music. Then in 1943, '*Subh Sukh Chain Ki*', a Hindustani variant of '*Jana Gana Mana*', became the national anthem of the Provisional Government of Free India proclaimed by Netaji in Singapore on 21 October 1943. Abid Hasan composed that song's lyrics, on which more below. [Sisir Kumar Bose has written about Netaji's last public appearance in Europe on 26 January 1943 in his memoir *Subhas and Sarat: An Intimate Memoir of the Bose Brothers*: 'On 26 January 1943, a date [Indian] nationalists observed as Independence Day [since 1931], Uncle Subhas delivered his last public address in Europe at a large ceremony in Berlin. Radio Berlin broadcast the entire speech. Home-interned [in Calcutta], I listened to the address. The Berlin Radio Orchestra played '*Jana Gana Mana*'. I cannot remember ever hearing a better rendition of our national anthem, even in India.' Ed.]

Abid Hasan recalls extensive discussions in Berlin about the choice of national anthem. Netaji, A. C. N. Nambiar, M. R. Vyas, N. G. Ganpuley and Girija Mookerjee discussed the matter threadbare. At one point, '*Bande Mataram*' was on the verge of being approved, but Abid Hasan objected. In the late 1930s, there had been a controversy in India over objections by some Muslims to Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's song as well as to the context of its composition, the novel *Ananda Math*. But that was not the reason for Abid Hasan's reservations; he did not care in the least about those objections. Abid Hasan felt '*Bande Mataram*' was too difficult as a song, especially to sing in chorus. During the discussion, he challenged the others – Netaji included – to sing it with the correct lyrics and tune. The national anthem, he argued, should be suitable for mass singing, including at large meetings and rallies. He said to us by way of an example: 'Krishnaji would have no problem singing it, because she is trained in classical Indian music and knows Sanskrit well. But what would the rest of us do? Call a trained singer every time to the podium and stand mute at attention?' Abid's view prevailed and '*Bande Mataram*' was shelved.

Then Muhammad Iqbal's '*Sare jahan se achha, Hindustan hamara*' came up as an option. Netaji himself was in favour. Abid Hasan had sounded out the Sikh soldiers about the idea and they too liked it, especially the reference to the river Ganga. Once again, Abid Hasan objected. He appreciated the beauty of Iqbal's 1904



composition but strongly disliked Iqbal's (1877–1938) later evolution towards Muslim separatism and his eventual gravitation to Jinnah and the idea of Pakistan. Once again, Abid prevailed and Iqbal's ode to Hindustan was rejected.

Abid Hasan does not remember who suggested '*Jana Gana Mana*' during the discussions but he does recall that everyone supported it and no objections were raised. They sang it together to test it out. Not everyone could sing it in the proper tune and melody at first, and Netaji sang it himself to show the others exactly how it should be sung. The national anthem was resolved.

In Europe, the Azad Hind movement did not use '*Jana Gana Mana*' very much. That was because many of the soldiers – Punjabis, Garhwalis, Rajputs and so on – had trouble pronouncing the lyrics correctly. But the orchestral version of the song was widely used and became very popular with all.

After Netaji's arrival in Southeast Asia, it was decided that the movement and its Provisional Government of Free India (*Arzi Hukumat-e Azad Hind*) should have its own original anthem. But the idea did not progress initially and Abid Hasan became impatient. Netaji liked to discuss matters big and small with colleagues before taking a decision. In Europe, the number of such advisers was small but in Southeast Asia their number expanded dramatically. In the end, Abid Hasan decided to take the matter in his own hands. He got hold of Captain Ram Singh Thakur, in charge of the INA's music, and another man who wrote Hindi poetry. The trio travelled to a secluded spot outside the city limits of Singapore and Hasan wrote the lyrics of '*Subh Sukh Chain Ki*', the Hindustani anthem of the Azad Hind Government. It was inspired by '*Jana Gana Mana*' but the lyrics diverged to some degree from Tagore's composition. Abid Hasan said to us: 'Well, I knew Tagore might turn in his grave and Bengalis might want to beat me up, but it needed to be done.' '*Subh Sukh Chain Ki*' was set to almost the same tune as '*Jana Gana Mana*'. Abid Hasan had taken along a ten-member band of INA soldier-musicians. Under Ram Singh's instruction, the band practised rendering the anthem as Ram Singh – a gifted vocalist and violinist of Garhwal-Kumaon origin – sang the newly composed lyrics. Then, the anthem was performed at an official function of the Provisional Government of Free India.

Stepping back a little in time, we asked Abid Hasan to clarify why the oath of allegiance taken by the Indian Legion's soldiers included Hitler, and not just Netaji. He replied that this was done to ensure that the Indian soldiers were entitled to the protections of the Geneva Conventions [*the 1929 version, which was updated and expanded in 1949, ed.*] if they were taken prisoner and especially if they were wounded or sick. Upon the proclamation of the Provisional Government of Free India in Singapore in October 1943 under Netaji's leadership, the Indian National Army



became the military force of that government-in-exile. But that came later. In Europe, there was no such government with its own structure and institutions. Therefore, unless the Legion was considered part of the Wehrmacht – the regular armed forces of Germany – its soldiers would not be entitled to be treated as combatants covered by the Geneva Conventions by the enemy.

Next, we came to a centrepiece of our conversation. When, and how, did Abid Hasan learn that Netaji had selected him to be his sole companion for the round-the-world voyage by submarine from Europe to East Asia?

A few days before the call came, Netaji visited the Indian Legion camp [*probably in Koenigsbruck, a small town near Dresden, ed.*] and met with the soldiers. In retrospect, Hasan did realize that the speech he made on the occasion contained an oblique hint that this was the last visit. [*Sisir Kumar Bose has written in Subhas and Sarat: 'It was March 1943. A radio broadcast from Berlin by Uncle Subhas struck a rather odd and artificial note to me. I felt I was listening to a pre-recorded address. Uncle Subhas had a set pattern and style in his radio broadcasts to India. He would first review the absolutely current war situation, then comment on the equally current political situation in India and finally give an update on his own activities at the time. The broadcast I listened to in Calcutta in March 1943 was lacking these attributes and there was no reference to any events after January. Suddenly, it dawned on me that he must have left Europe and was on his way to the Far East! However, I thought Uncle Subhas must be travelling to East Asia via Turkey and then Soviet Siberia. There were no formal hostilities then between the Soviet Union and Japan. I could not have imagined that he was undertaking the journey by submarine over 93 days!' Ed.*]

It was a morning a few days after the visit. It was around 10 a.m. and the soldiers were practising battle manoeuvres in the camp. Suddenly, Abid Hasan was called to the camp office. He was a bit surprised because it was most unusual to be summoned like this while the daily training was on. Krappe, the camp's commanding officer, had called him. Krappe [*Lieutenant-Colonel Kurt Krappe, ed.*] told him that Herr Bose had sent a message that Hasan should come to Berlin immediately. That was not so unusual, except that Krappe told him to deposit his weapons and equipment with the camp's quartermaster before leaving. Krappe then reached out to shake Hasan's hand and said: '*Auf Wiedersehen.*' (Farewell.) Hasan was quite mystified by Krappe's formal and solemn manner; after all, he went frequently to Berlin. As he exited Krappe's office, he ran into Seifitz, another officer. Seifitz said: 'Oh, I heard you are off to Berlin. Well, auf Wiedersehen!' Then another German officer, who was in charge of Abid's battalion in the Indian Legion, also shook his hand and bade him farewell. [*It is almost impossible, given the imperative of secrecy, that these German officers had been told anything about Netaji's imminent departure. But from*



*Abid Hasan's account, it seems they had been told he was needed in Berlin and would not be returning to the camp. Ed.]*

Hasan puzzled over this sudden turn of events on the train to Berlin. On arrival in the city, he met Nambiar and Ganpuley, who simply told him that Netaji wanted to speak to him. He met Netaji the next day. Netaji asked him if he was prepared to take a big risk. Abid Hasan replied that he was not afraid of war; indeed that was why had he taken combat training. Netaji then said that the task did not involve fighting as such but would be extremely dangerous, and again asked Abid if he was ready to take it on. Abid Hasan felt a bit nervous and replied: 'Yes, sir.' Seeing the nervous look on his face, Netaji told him that he did not need to decide immediately and give an answer. He told Abid to think it over and they would speak again the next day.

There was a particular reason for Abid Hasan's discomfiture. Some months previously, Netaji had had an idea to send an agent from Germany to the Haj pilgrimage in Mecca, to make contacts among the Indian pilgrims there. Now, Abid thought, Netaji had decided to act on the idea and chosen him for the mission. The last thing Abid wanted was to go to Saudi Arabia disguised as a pilgrim. But, he felt, he could not say 'No' to Netaji. He spent an uneasy and disconsolate night.

The next day, he met Netaji again and gave his assent. Netaji asked him to think it over carefully, since he had appeared uncertain the previous day. This time, Abid Hasan decided to be frank. He told Netaji that the task he had been assigned was not at all to his liking, and that was the reason for his hesitation. Netaji looked surprised and asked Abid if he knew what task awaited him. Abid Hasan blurted out: 'Well, you had said someone from here would have to go on the Haj to Arabia as a secret agent. I really don't want to go there but I will do as you say.' Netaji then said to him: 'So, you are willing to take a big risk for me.'

On Netaji's instructions, Abid Hasan ditched his military uniform and kept a case with his only black suit and some other civilian clothes ready for the impending journey to Mecca. Netaji told him that until the departure, he should attend to routine work at the Free India Centre. Abid Hasan was not pleased and told A. C. N. Nambiar – whom Netaji designated as the in-charge of the Azad Hind movement in Europe from February 1943 onwards – that he had been given a most unwelcome task and did not wish to spend his remaining days in Berlin doing office work. Nambiar told him that he was not needed in the office but should drop in at the Centre every day, since the call to depart could come at any time.

The call came very soon. On the morning of 8 February 1943, Abid Hasan arrived as instructed at Berlin's Lehrter Bahnhof train station. This was the station from which trains departed to destinations in northwest Germany, especially the city of



Hamburg. On arrival, Abid was taken aback to find a bustle of activity, with bigwigs in attendance. Netaji himself was there. Nambiar was there too, as were Wilhelm Keppler, the secretary of state in the German foreign office, and Alexander Werth, the deputy chief of the foreign office's special India bureau. That was the moment Abid Hasan realized that Netaji was going somewhere and he would be accompanying his leader.

Mr Nambiar had told Sisir and me when we met him at his home in Zurich, Switzerland in 1971 that Abid Hasan had been studying Greek grammar in the days before the departure. So, Mr Nambiar thought, Abid Hasan was under the impression he would be sent to Greece on some secret mission. But Abid Hasan now revealed to us that he used 'studying Greek' as a ruse to avoid reporting for routine work at the Free India Centre. He was convinced he was on his way to Mecca – what use would Greek be there?

The train carrying Netaji and Abid Hasan left Berlin's Lehrter Bahnhof. Nambiar, Keppler and Werth accompanied them on the train journey; the others present at the station bade farewell from the platform. As the train gathered pace, Netaji asked Abid Hasan if he now understood where they were travelling.

Abid Hasan replied: 'Yes, sir.'

'Where?' Netaji asked.

Abid Hasan responded: 'You and I are going on the Haj together.'

Their destination was Kiel, the Baltic Sea port located north of Hamburg.

### **The Submarine Journey**

Abid Hasan spent a day and night in Kiel in a state of great excitement. But his heart sank when he entered the submarine on the morning of 9 February 1943. It was cramped and claustrophobic. There was a long, narrow passage with sleeping bunks against the walls. The bunk allotted to Netaji was in a small alcove but all the other bunks were on the corridor, with no privacy at all. There was hardly any space to move around, and Hasan realized he would have to either lie on his bunk or stand in the passage during the journey. There was only one sitting area: a small table where six could sit if they sat very close together. Meals were usually taken at the table but sometimes they also ate sitting on their bunks. As soon as Abid Hasan entered the submarine, the stench of diesel hit his nostrils and made him nauseous. The whole craft stank of diesel – even the blanket on Hasan's bunk reeked with the smell. The pungent smell was everywhere, even in the food they ate. Abid Hasan's excitement evaporated as he realized that he would have to spend three months in these surroundings and conditions. *[The submarine was one of the legendary German U-boats of World War II. Netaji's craft, numbered U-180, was*



*commissioned into the German Navy in May 1942. Its commander during Netaji's journey was Werner Musenberg. U-180 was sunk in August 1944 while operating under a different commander in the Bay of Biscay in the Atlantic, and all its fifty-six crewmen perished. Ed.]*

On the very first day, Abid Hasan noticed at the 'dining' table that Netaji was eating hardly anything. He could tell why. There was plenty of food but the military rations for frontline combatants consisted of thick bread, tough meat, and tinned vegetables which looked and tasted like gum. Abid became concerned. How would Netaji survive on this diet for three months? He also felt annoyed that Netaji had kept the round-the-world submarine voyage secret from him until the departure from Berlin. Had he known even a little in advance, he could easily have acquired provisions for the journey, both foodstuffs and spices with which to cook. But now it was too late, so he would have to improvise.

Abid Hasan raided the U-boat's larder. There he found a packet of rice and a packet of lentils, which he promptly appropriated. There was also a large tin of egg powder. Abid considered taking this too, but then thought it might look selfish. Nonetheless, the egg powder provided omelettes for breakfast for the next few weeks. For the other meals, Abid relied on the precious packets of rice and lentils. He cooked *khichuri* (the rice-lentil mix popular in Bengal) for Netaji. Netaji was pleased to see *khichuri* on the table. He immediately called the German officers and offered them a share of the Indian dish. Abid Hasan was aghast. He was determined to preserve the rice and lentils for Netaji's consumption and if other people started eating *khichuri* the supply would run out in days. But he could not bring himself to tell Netaji this. So he discreetly spoke to the German officers instead. It turned out that the Germans did not particularly like the rice-lentil concoction anyway, but had thought it impolite to decline Netaji's offer. From then on, Abid Hasan sparingly used the rice and lentils for Netaji's meals – sometimes *khichuri*, sometimes the traditional Bengali *daal-bhaat* (rice with lentil gravy). Abid Hasan's limited cooking abilities came in very useful as the U-180 traversed seas and oceans for the next three months.





Netaji on the deck of the German U-180 submarine, 1943

When the U-180 left Kiel, it was part of a small convoy of U-boats. The lead submarine was a minesweeper, whose task was to detect and detonate mines scattered on the surface of the sea by the enemy. For some distance beyond Kiel, the Germans had full dominance of the sea and the U-boat convoy was able to travel above water some of the time. They travelled along the Danish coastline. Sweden was next, and it was a neutral country so caution had to be exercised in Swedish waters. The Norwegian coastline came next. Close to Kristiansand, on Norway's



south coast, the convoy broke up and the U-boats went off in different directions; the minesweeper too departed. From that point, the U-180, with Subhas Chandra Bose and Abid Hasan on board, commenced its solitary journey.

The submarine moved into the deep waters of the North Sea. This was a dangerous area, lying between Scotland and Iceland. The British air force bombed this area almost constantly, using depth charges. Indeed, incessant 'boom-boom' sounds were clearly audible as the U-boat glided under water through the North Sea towards the Atlantic Ocean.

Abid Hasan soon got used to the submarine's day-night routine. During the day, the submarine travelled under water. At night, it would surface. Modern submarines can remain submerged under water for days on end. But their World War II submarine ran on diesel and used battery power for its equipment. So every night, it needed to surface to charge the batteries. Just before dawn broke on the eastern sky, it would disappear under the water.

When the submarine surfaced at night, its captain, Werner Musenberg, would often ask Netaji and Abid Hasan to come and sit on the bridge (roof). It was a relief from being cooped up inside during the day, and a chance to stretch out a bit. On hitting the Atlantic, the submarine went northward, in the direction of Greenland. For a while, it seemed to Hasan that they were on an expedition to the North Pole! The detour was necessary to reduce the risk of being spotted and attacked from the air. But the circuitous route brought magnificent vistas with it. When they surfaced, they could see striking ice formations on the sea. A wonderful sight, Abid Hasan recalls.

Then the submarine gradually turned south and approached the coastline of France. Near the Cherbourg peninsula, which juts out of the Normandy coastline, a 'U-tanker', also known as a 'mothership' among sailors, approached their submarine. The U-tanker was a submarine used for refuelling U-boats at sea. The U-tanker supplied Netaji's vessel with the diesel required for the long trans-oceanic journey that lay ahead.

Netaji gave the crew of the U-tanker some important documents for delivery to the Free India Centre in Berlin. There were some letters, but the most important was the revised manuscript of his book, *The Indian Struggle*. Netaji had been working on the revisions on the submarine, and had completed them by the time of the rendezvous near Cherbourg.

On the second day of the submarine journey, Abid Hasan was ruing to himself that he had not brought along some books to read, to pass the time and relieve the tedium of the long voyage that lay ahead. Had he known what he was getting into even a little in advance, he would have made sure to do so. Suddenly Netaji said to



him: '*Hasan, tum to typewriter le liya, na?*' (Hasan, you have brought the typewriter, haven't you?)

Indeed, Hasan had brought his typewriter. That was the beginning of almost incessant work, until they arrived in Sumatra three months later. The work kept both men occupied and enabled them to cope with life on the submarine. Otherwise, the claustrophobic environment would have been unbearable. There was no space to walk around or even exercise properly. And of course, there was no daylight – it felt like one continuous night on the submarine, with the lights on all the time.

First, *The Indian Struggle* was revised. Then, Netaji started meticulously planning his activities on arrival in East Asia. He began to dictate the speeches he would give. Netaji's habit was to write out his speeches in advance. But – except on very formal occasions and for radio broadcasts – he would always speak without any text or notes. People did not realize that the extemporaneous speeches had in fact been prepared in advance in 'homework' style, with all the major points written out. Before the event, Netaji would study that carefully and then tear up the sheets and throw them away. Abid Hasan says 'my heart used to bleed' when Netaji threw away the sheets he had typed out.

Apart from the speeches, there were other preparations. Netaji started planning how he would interact and negotiate with the Japanese government and its officials. He even asked Abid Hasan to play the role of Hideki Tojo, Japan's prime minister. He asked Abid to assume Tojo's role and ask him pointed questions about his plans and intentions.

The breaks from work came when the submarine surfaced at night. When they sat on the bridge amid the vast, dark oceans, Netaji would be in an informal, talkative mood and they would chat. During these chats, Abid Hasan would sometimes ask Netaji questions. On one occasion, he asked Netaji what he found most difficult about public life. Netaji replied: '*Chhote chhote logoko khoshamad karna* (having to flatter the vanity of small people).' Another time, he asked Netaji what his most painful experience in life had been. Netaji replied without a moment's hesitation: 'To be in exile,' away from India. Sitting on the submarine's bridge that night, Abid Hasan felt this remark had a particular poignancy.





Netaji and Abid Hasan on the deck of the German U-180 submarine, 1943

We had seen photographs of Netaji sitting on the submarine's bridge and enjoying a cigarette while chatting with Abid Hasan. So we asked him about Netaji's smoking habit. Abid Hasan said that in Europe, Netaji was a light smoker. The smoking increased after he reached Southeast Asia. There, the pressure of work was such that smoking became a way to cope, and sometimes he would chain-smoke. *[Sisir Kumar Bose has written in Subhas and Sarat that in 1960, he went to meet Pandit Nehru at Parliament House in New Delhi and found the prime minister chain-smoking. Sisir told Nehru that he remembered Nehru smoking, but only a couple of cigarettes after meals, when he stayed with them at Sarat Bose's 1 Woodburn Park house in Calcutta in the late 1930s. In fact, the young Sisir would buy Nehru tins of his favourite Marcovitch Black and White cigarettes. As they smoked together in Delhi in 1960, Nehru told Sisir that he had heard that Subhas too became a heavy smoker during the war. Then he said to Sisir: 'It's the strain, you know, that's why I smoke. I suppose it was the same with Subhas.' Ed.]*

What about alcohol, we asked Abid Hasan out of curiosity. Abid Hasan said that Netaji had no taboos regarding alcohol. From March 1933, when Netaji arrived in Europe for a long period of enforced exile from India that lasted almost without interruption until March 1936, he gradually became used to the culture of Europe, where wine was served with meals and various kinds of alcoholic drinks on social occasions. Indeed, this was common even in official meetings – for example, a round of wine being served when Netaji met in wartime Europe with Ribbentrop, the German foreign minister. Netaji would partake without any fuss. This continued in East Asia, especially during meetings with Japanese dignitaries and commanders. *[When A. C. N. Nambiar met with Netaji in Paris in 1941 after his arrival in Europe, Nambiar was pleasantly surprised when Netaji happily joined him in drinking Dubonnet, a traditional French aperitif. Ed.]*



After arriving in Singapore at the beginning of July 1943, Netaji would work almost non-stop. He would work until three in the morning and then be up again at the crack of dawn. [*Sisir Kumar Bose has written in Subhas and Sarat that Netaji had a longstanding habit of working till very late into the night, but in Calcutta he would then sleep until late morning. In Singapore, that was clearly not possible, but Netaji would take very short naps during the day to compensate. Ed.*] Abid Hasan could not keep up with Netaji and told him forthrightly that he could not survive on two hours of sleep. They then agreed that Abid Hasan would go to bed by midnight and wake up at dawn to assist Netaji. Before going to bed, Abid would pour Netaji a glass of brandy as he continued working at his desk. But then, Netaji would want to share the brandy with INA officers who called late. For example, when Colonel Prem Sahgal – who loved his drink – came by, Netaji would ask Abid to give him some brandy as well. Abid Hasan was annoyed; he had procured the finest brandy for Netaji with some difficulty in wartime Singapore. To preserve the precious supply, Abid took to keeping just a small amount in the original bottle and would pretend that was all that was left.

There are two remarkable moments Abid Hasan recalls from the journey in the German submarine. On one occasion, their U-boat spotted and torpedoed a British oil tanker. It was quite a sight – it was as if the sea was ablaze as the flames engulfed the ship. They could see that there were some crew aboard the burning ship who looked Indian and possibly Malaysian. These brown-skins were left to their fate, while a large life boat that was launched was packed with white men. [*On 18 April 1943, the U-180 sank an 8,000-tonne British oil tanker called Corbis. Ed.*]

The other incident was even more memorable. Commander Musenberg spotted a British warship through his periscope and ordered his crew to torpedo it. As the torpedoes were being readied, a sailor made a mistake with some equipment and the U-boat rose up and surfaced! The British ship came charging towards the U-boat. Musenberg frantically called out 'Dive! Dive!' and the U-boat barely managed to disappear underwater and get away, but not before the ship rammed the railing on its bridge (the roof/ deck) and it keeled over partially.

Abid Hasan was frozen with fear when he suddenly heard Netaji's calm voice, in a tone of mild reprimand: 'Hasan, I just repeated the same point twice.' Netaji had been dictating the draft of the speech he planned to deliver to the soldiers of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, the INA women's regiment he intended to form upon arriving in Singapore. [*In the rousing speech, delivered to the first recruits on 12 July 1943 in Singapore, he called on them to emulate India's Rani of Jhansi and France's Joan of Arc. Ed.*] With shaking hands, Abid Hasan resumed taking notes. Once the danger was past, Musenberg gathered the crew together and told them that their



distinguished Indian guest and his companion had set an example of how to remain calm in dire danger. Abid Hasan knew that was in fact true only of Netaji; he had been terrified.

Netaji's submarine skirted the long western coastline of Africa. On the day they crossed the equator, there was a small party on the submarine. This 'baptism' celebration was a longstanding tradition of seafarers. Netaji and Abid took part in the ritual, which involved dousing each other with water.

In the last week of April, the U-180 approached the island of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. The seas around Madagascar were relatively unaffected by the maritime hostilities of the war, so the area had been chosen for the U-180 to rendezvous with a Japanese submarine which would carry Netaji to East Asia. Netaji would be transferred from the German U-boat to the Japanese submarine. That mid-ocean transfer was, in Abid Hasan's words, 'a very fascinating experience'.



Netaji being transferred on a rubber dinghy in the Indian Ocean, off Madagascar, from the German U-180 to the Japanese I-29 submarine, 28 April 1943

On 26 April 1943, the two submarines approached each other. First, the German submarine raised its periscope above the water and then the Japanese submarine did the same. Then the two submarines surfaced at the same time.

But the seas were extremely choppy, which made the transfer very difficult. Buffeted by the waves, the two submarines could not come close enough to each other for Netaji to cross from the deck of the one to the other on a plank, as planned. It was decided to wait for the sea to calm down, but on 27 April it was just as turbulent. The transfer could not be delayed any longer. Finally, just before daybreak on 28 April, a rubber dinghy was lowered from the German submarine into the Indian Ocean's waters. Netaji said his thanks and goodbyes to the crew of the U-boat and got into the rubber dinghy and sat down, followed by Abid Hasan. The dinghy



swayed crazily in the choppy sea and the waves cascaded on it, completely drenching Netaji. They could see the crew of both submarines assembled on the roofs of their respective craft, watching with anxious faces. After some effort, the dinghy was pulled towards the Japanese submarine. A minute later, Subhas Chandra Bose and Abid Hasan stepped on the roof of the Japanese submarine.



Netaji and Abid Hasan just after boarding the Japanese submarine, 28 April 1943

After the rather hair-raising transfer, Netaji and Abid Hasan quickly settled in as passengers on the Japanese submarine, designated as I-29 in Japan's navy. Abid Hasan discovered to his delight that unlike the German U-180, the I-29 was a spacious craft. It was not cramped and the claustrophobic feel was absent. There was even a good-sized lounge. The day after they boarded, the Japanese emperor's birthday was celebrated on the submarine. The submarine's officers gathered together in the lounge for the observance. Abid Hasan cast a look around the fairly large firstfloor drawing room of our 90 Sarat Bose Road residence and said: 'It was about three-fourths of this room, just about enough to accommodate two dozen or so people.'

Although he had spent several years in Germany, Abid Hasan felt more at home in the company of the Japanese submariners, compared to the Germans. The crew of U-180 had been nothing but cordial, but somehow the atmosphere on the Japanese submarine was different and Abid Hasan sensed a touch of human warmth. He thinks that the tradition of Asian hospitality which he knew so well may have been a factor. To top it off, the food served on the Japanese submarine was excellent!

On the German U-boat, Netaji and Abid had experienced two encounters with enemy ships. That was because the U-boat's commander and crew were under orders to attack enemy vessels they came across during the journey. By contrast, the I-29's commander and crew were under strict orders to not get involved in any



hostilities – their task was simply to transport Subhas Chandra Bose speedily and safely to East Asia. The journey passed without incident. The only difficulty, Hasan recalls, was the language barrier. Both Netaji and he were proficient in German, but they had no clue about the Japanese language and there was no translator on board. But they coped with this minor problem. *[The I-29's name was 'Matsu', the Japanese word for a pine tree. It was commissioned in the Japanese navy in February 1942. The mission to collect Netaji southeast of Madagascar and bring him to East Asia was personally commanded by Masao Teraoka, the commander of Japan's submarine fleet. The I-29 was sunk off the Philippines in July 1944 in a combined attack by three American submarines. All but one of its 101 crewmen perished. Ed.]*



Netaji and Abid Hasan with the officers of the Japanese I-29 submarine on its deck, end-April 1943

On 13 May 1943, the I-29 arrived in Sabang, an island just off the northern coast of Sumatra. *[Sabang is the northwestern-most point of Indonesia. Ed.]* As they



stepped off the submarine, the two Indians were greeted by a familiar face – Colonel Yamamoto, who had been the military attache in Japan's Berlin embassy and had now been assigned to head *Hikari Kikan*, the Japanese intelligence and liaison organization responsible for coordination and relations with the Azad Hind movement and the INA. Yamamoto was accompanied by another official, Mr M. Senda, as well as by a translator. Abid Hasan could not remember the translator's name and I reminded him: 'Sasaki.' Mr Sasaki came to Calcutta a few years ago accompanying General Fujiwara Iwaichi, who as a Major in the Japanese army and its military intelligence wing had been principally responsible for launching the Indian National Army in Singapore in February 1942. [*Fujiwara, born in 1908, remained a great friend of India all his life, until his death in 1986. He was a close friend of Sisir and Krishna Bose, hosted them in Japan in 1979, and was involved with the Netaji Research Bureau from 1967 onwards. After the war, he became a senior officer of the Japan Ground Self-Defence Force and retired as Lieutenant General in the mid-1960s. Ed.*] Sasaki had told us about receiving Netaji and Abid Hasan in Sabang and about acting as Netaji's interpreter. He told us that after disembarking from the submarine, Netaji and his companion were taken to a bungalow to rest. Abid Hasan confirmed this sequence of events.

How did it feel to be on land again after ninety-three days at sea, mostly underwater? Abid Hasan recalled his release from Bombay's Arthur Road jail a decade earlier, where he had been imprisoned for participating in Gandhiji's non-violent civil disobedience movement. When he emerged from the jail, he found that friends had come to receive him with a car. But Abid wanted to walk after his confinement. However, after walking just a short distance, he felt exhausted and got into the car. Abid Hasan says that he experienced a similar, short-lived feeling of exhaustion after the round-the-world voyage by submarine ended.

## Tokyo

Netaji, however, showed no signs of fatigue and immediately started to discuss his plans with Yamamoto and Senda. Sasaki was an excellent interpreter and accompanied them to Tokyo a few days later. Abid Hasan noticed that Yamamoto and Senda did not seem very optimistic about the prospects of the Azad Hind movement. The first INA, set up under Mohan Singh's command on the fall of Singapore in February 1942, had become moribund due to the absence of effective leadership and disagreements with the Japanese. A revival was uncertain, perhaps even unlikely.

I told Abid Hasan that Joyce Lebra, an American historian, has written in a recent book on the Japanese-INA relationship – *Jungle Alliance* – that the ambivalent and



even somewhat disinterested Japanese attitude towards the INA and the Azad Hind movement underwent a sea change after Netaji's arrival in East Asia. From Prime Minister Hideki Tojo downwards, Japan's leaders became supportive and cooperative. Professor Lebra attributes this change primarily to the power of Netaji's personality, which greatly impressed the Japanese leaders. Abid Hasan said: 'That's absolutely right. Now let me tell you how events unfolded after we reached Tokyo on 16 May 1943.'

Netaji, Abid Hasan and their Japanese escorts travelled by air from Sabang to Tokyo. There were stops in Penang, Saigon, Manila and Taihoku (Taipei) on the way. The first stop in Japan was in the southern city of Fukuoka. Here, they were given a formal welcome over a traditional dinner ceremony. It was Abid Hasan's first experience of Japanese etiquette and hospitality and he remembers it vividly.

There was a large room arranged and furnished in traditional Japanese style. One wall was decorated with an eye-catching scroll painting. Netaji was seated in front of it. Fukuoka was a major military base and soon a procession of senior officers started trooping in. Some of them looked of really high rank, their uniforms studded with epaulettes and medals. They came in a single-file procession towards where Netaji was seated, stopped in the centre of the room and bowed their heads repeatedly in respect. Then they got down on their knees, spread both hands out in front, touched the ground with the hands and finally, bent their heads and touched their foreheads on the floor. Abid Hasan was reminded of the *namaaz* ritual. To make sure I got every detail, he asked me to pretend I was Netaji and acted out of the role of a Japanese officer in front of me. Netaji remained seated but kept bowing his head in acknowledgment of the greetings. Just before the senior officers invited to the dinner arrived, a junior officer had quietly walked in and taken a seat behind Netaji. Now Abid Hasan realized why he was there. Netaji, being the distinguished and honoured guest, was not supposed to bow his head beyond a certain angle as the officers paid their respects one after another. Every time Netaji lowered his head, the junior officer alerted him to when he should stop with a gentle tug on his coat. The dinner was simply delicious and Netaji appreciated the welcome very much.

Later, when Abid Hasan described the ceremonial welcome to other Japanese officers he got to know, they expressed a degree of surprise. Apparently, the Japanese did not go to such lengths of courtesy with a foreigner, even if he happened to be a high dignitary. It seemed that special instructions had been given to accord Subhas Chandra Bose the highest level of official courtesy.

When their plane arrived in the skies above Tokyo, it transpired they would not be able to land because of inclement weather. The plane was diverted to a small



military airstrip some distance outside Tokyo, where they disembarked.

It was a small military airport, in a rural setting. There was no place to stay, except a modest local inn. Yamamoto and Senda kept apologizing to Netaji for the inconvenience. But Abid Hasan was quite charmed by the inn, which was pretty and spotlessly clean. He was also happy to get an unexpected day for relaxation, because he knew it would be hectic once they reached Tokyo. He had a bath in his room at the inn and when he emerged from the bath, he spotted a few kimonos neatly arranged for the use of guests. He selected the most colourful one and put it on, and decided to go for a walk in the village. Netaji was also in the bath, and Abid knew that if there was no reason for hurry, Netaji liked to take longer baths.

As Abid Hasan, kimono-clad, emerged from his room, the Japanese maid saw him and giggled. The inn's other employees also started smiling at his kimono-clad appearance. Abid Hasan went out and took a stroll through the village. He noticed that everyone he encountered smiled at his appearance, a few broke into laughter and one or two spoke to him in Japanese, which he of course did not understand. Abid Hasan put their behaviour down to friendliness. But when he returned to the inn, their Japanese companions saw him and started howling with laughter. They told Netaji: 'Look what your secretary has done!' Abid Hasan was wearing a ladies' kimono. It was an unforgettable light moment. Soon a car arrived and they all set off for a nice tour of the area.

On 16 May 1943, Netaji and Abid Hasan checked into Tokyo's Imperial Hotel.

The first meeting between Netaji and Tojo happened three weeks later, on 10 June 1943. I queried Abid Hasan about the reason for the delay. Did the Japanese premier keep Netaji waiting? Was there any hesitation on Tojo's part about supporting the Azad Hind movement? Abid Hasan said no. It was Netaji who was in no great hurry to meet with Tojo. He wanted to lay the groundwork for a successful meeting first, and proceeded to do so systematically in two ways.

First, Netaji held a series of meetings with other top Japanese leaders. After initial discussions with senior officials of the Japanese foreign office, he met one by one with Shigemitsu, the foreign minister, Field Marshal Sugiyama, chief of general staff of the Japanese Army, and Admiral Yonai of the Japanese Navy, among many others. Abid Hasan says Netaji used these meetings to educate them. Educate them? About what? The subject was the history of the Indian struggle for freedom. He would start with the 1857 Revolt, the first war of independence, and gradually come to the present. Netaji lauded Mahatma Gandhi's historic achievement of making the Indian struggle a mass movement of the people, but noted the limits of purely non-violent means against the entrenched power of the British Raj. Nehru also came up, and Netaji mentioned his ambivalent stance on the war and whether



to turn Britain's difficulty into India's opportunity. Jinnah's campaign for Pakistan was discussed as well. Netaji said with conviction that the Azad Hind Fauj would prove the two-nation theory being peddled by Jinnah to be a bogus construct.

The meetings went on day after day and more and more Japanese leaders, civilian and military, gained a first-hand impression of Bose's calibre and resolve. Netaji would speak, the interpreter would translate, and the high Japanese officials would diligently take notes. Abid Hasan also took copious notes. It was Netaji's way of introducing himself to the Japanese leadership and acquainting them with his mission, and he knew very well that Tojo must be getting briefings about the meetings. Very quickly, word of how impressive Netaji was spread through the Japanese leadership hierarchy. Abid Hasan recalls how General Seizo Arisue, the redoubtable chief of intelligence of the Japanese Army, would greet 'Bose-san' with utmost respect even though they had just met.

Second, Netaji decided to rapidly familiarize himself with Japan, its society and its people. As soon as they landed in Sabang, Abid Hasan remembers, Netaji told Colonel Yamamoto that he wished to acquaint himself with contemporary Japan and its life. Once in Japan, he visited primary schools, factories and hospitals, even shipbuilding yards. He spent a day at Tokyo University, where he met many of the faculty. Among them was a well-known poet whose name Abid Hasan couldn't initially recall. I reminded him: 'Noguchi.' Abid Hasan said: 'Yes, yes, Noguchi!' Noguchi had been to India before the war and became a friend of Rabindranath Tagore, until the two had a disagreement about Japanese aggression against China. On 20 June 1943, Noguchi composed a poem in which he hailed Subhas Chandra Bose as the leader of the final, climactic struggle for India's freedom, which would break the shackles of colonial slavery the saintly Gandhi had tried but failed to liberate India from. [*Yonejiro Noguchi, usually known as Yone Noguchi, 1875-1947, was a very prominent poet, essayist and literary critic. Ed.*] The Japanese public greatly appreciated the keen interest the Indian leader who had arrived on their shores showed in their country. The groundwork for cooperation as equals with Japan was laid in three hectic weeks after Netaji's arrival in Tokyo.

Tojo was quite bowled over when he met Bose on 10 June 1943. In the words of an American historian: 'The magic of Bose enchanted Tojo immediately.' Indeed, there was something magical about the Indian revolutionary who had travelled across the world, defying danger and death, to seek help for achieving his country's freedom: 'His face, his voice, his eyes - captured hearts and minds.' There was a second meeting on 14 June. During this meeting, Netaji asked Tojo very directly if Japan was prepared to support - unconditionally, he stressed - India's final struggle for freedom.



On 16 June 1943, General Hideki Tojo publicly gave that commitment in a speech to the *Diet*, Japan's parliament. Subhas Chandra Bose listened to the speech sitting in the distinguished visitors' gallery.



Krishna and Sisir Bose with Madame Tojo, the widow of Japan's wartime prime minister, General Hideki Tojo, at her home in Tokyo, 1979



The remaining days in Tokyo were also filled with activity. Netaji addressed a press conference, and gave a radio broadcast. There were private events as well: one evening, Netaji had dinner at Colonel Yamamoto's residence. Abid Hasan was not invited to this dinner – it was very unusual for Japanese families to invite foreigners to their home. But as an exception to the rule, Netaji enjoyed a delicious dinner prepared by Mrs Yamamoto. He told Abid that he felt especially touched, and honoured, when Mrs Yamamoto welcomed him to their home by going down on her knees and touching her forehead on the floor.

Abid Hasan remembers one other incident well. A Japanese admiral turned up at the Imperial Hotel and presented Netaji with a talisman – an amulet. The admiral said it would protect his life and urged him to wear it. Netaji accepted the gift gracefully and immediately put it aside. He never wore it.

Before leaving Tokyo, Netaji met with the veteran anti-colonial revolutionary Rash Behari Bose, who had been living in Japan as a political exile for almost three decades. He also met with Mitsuru Toyama, the head of the Black Dragon Society, who had been instrumental in securing Rash Behari Bose refuge in Japan when the British were trying to get him extradited to India.

On 27 June 1943, Netaji, accompanied by Abid Hasan, flew out of Tokyo. Their destination: Singapore.

## Singapore

The dizzying pace of Netaji and Abid Hasan's adventures was hard to keep up with, even as listeners and three decades after the events. At this point of the marathon narration, we all felt we needed a break. Evening had fallen outside. The room was filled with smoke from Abid Hasan's cigarettes. I opened a window. Abid Hasan said: 'Let's go out for a bit. I need to buy some saris, Bengali *tangail* saris.'

I got ready to go out. When I returned, I found he had changed his mind. He still wanted to go out, but to buy a puppy, not saris. He excitedly showed me an advertisement he had just noticed in the classifieds section of *The Statesman* newspaper. Someone had advertised a Golden Retriever puppy for sale. The address was in New Alipore – not far from our house on Sarat Bose Road, but an area with a complicated scheme where addresses were often difficult to locate, especially in the dark. But off we went in search of the puppy.

I knew about Abid Hasan's love of pets – but cats, not dogs. Netaji did not like cats. In Netaji's Meyer Road house in Singapore where Abid too lived, Abid secretly kept two kittens. They were both white in colour, flecked with grey spots. Abid Hasan would share his own ration of milk with them, and they would sleep with him in his bed. Knowing Netaji's dislike of cats, he was careful to keep them out of his



sight. But one day, the pair slipped into Netaji's study and jumped on his desk. Hearing the commotion, Abid came running. He could not even pretend that they were stray cats which had wandered into the house because as soon as they saw Abid, they started miaowing in evident pleasure and began to nuzzle with him. Netaji was angry and asked Abid why he had kept them without telling him. Abid mumbled in embarrassment: 'Well, I thought you might like them; look how cute they are.'



Netaji's wartime residence on Singapore's Meyer Road. The house no longer exists.

When Netaji moved from Singapore to Rangoon in early 1944, there were initially no house pets. But somehow, the local felines discovered that Abid Hasan was in residence. First, a big Burmese male cat appeared in the garden. After a few days, its female companion too appeared. Soon, the couple established a full-fledged family under the staircase. Netaji had to adjust to their presence.

As I had anticipated, it proved difficult to locate the house in New Alipore. We tried two or three houses where we could hear dogs barking. Whenever we heard barking, Abid Hasan got excited and said: There, the Golden Retriever mother is calling! Finally, we found the correct house but the negotiation with the seller did not go well and we retraced our steps. Abid Hasan was disappointed. The next day, I contacted friends who ran a dog lovers' club and requested them to supply a Golden Retriever puppy if possible. Very soon, a sweet Golden Retriever pup, Andy, was delivered to our home. After a few days, Abid Hasan returned from Calcutta to Hyderabad with his new pet. *[Andy unfortunately met an early death a few years later when he got into a fight with a cobra on Abid Hasan's farm in Hyderabad. Andy killed the cobra but died from the snake's poisonous bite. Ed.]*

On 2 July 1943, Subhas Chandra Bose and Abid Hasan landed in Singapore. They were welcomed at the airport by a large contingent of senior INA officers including J. K. Bhonsle, Mohammad Zaman Kiani, Shah Nawaz Khan and Prem Kumar Sahgal. Lakshmi Swaminathan, a doctor who would very soon become the commander of the INA's Rani of Jhansi Regiment, was also there. At a rapturous public meeting



on 4 July, Rash Behari Bose formally turned over the leadership of the Azad Hind movement to Netaji. On 5 July, Netaji took the salute at an impressive parade of some 15,000 INA soldiers on Singapore's *padang* (maidan), close to the sea face, joined by Tojo. On 9 July, Netaji addressed a huge rally, at least 60,000 strong, of INA soldiers and tens of thousands of civilians living in Singapore who were from India or of Indian origin.

Abid Hasan told us that Netaji prepared these first historic speeches made in Singapore during their stay in Tokyo. Netaji wrote out or dictated the texts in English and Abid Hasan translated them into Hindustani. In Germany, a member of the Free India Centre called Habib used to do this job of translating Netaji's speeches. Abid felt that Habib rendered the speeches in excessively formal Urdu. Abid Hasan thought the translations should be simpler and he translated into straightforward Hindi, without difficult or ornate words, with some Urdu words and phrases mixed in. As always, Netaji took a good look at the translation [*written in the Roman script, ed.*] and then tore it up and threw it away, because he almost invariably spoke without any text or notes. Netaji would sometimes get annoyed if he felt that Abid Hasan had tinkered with the speech. But still, Abid would occasionally use his judgment and do so, within limits. Once, Netaji got irritated when Abid omitted the term 'dialectical materialism'. Abid told him: 'Sir, I don't quite understand the meaning even in English; how am I to render it in Hindustani?'

When Netaji spoke at the 9 July 1943 rally in Singapore, the effect was electrifying. The huge gathering was held spellbound and, as soon as Netaji finished his rousing oration, a sea of people came charging towards the stage. Abid Hasan said: 'I know Netaji Research Bureau has footage of those moments.' Indeed. Abid Hasan is visible on the stage, trying to calm down the crowd of soldiers and civilians with his arms raised.

Netaji called for the total mobilization of the Indian and Indian-origin communities living in Southeast Asia in the final struggle for India's freedom, and urged everyone to give whatever resources they possessed to the movement. The response was almost unbelievable – especially in Malaya, Singapore and slightly later in Burma as well. Women donated their personal jewellery, sometimes taking off their ornaments and handing them to Netaji at public meetings. There were cases of very wealthy businessmen who gave all their assets to the Azad Hind movement and became fakirs overnight. Even entrepreneurs of a relatively modest level pitched in. Abid Hasan recalls a milk trader who donated his entire flock of two hundred cows to the movement. The man said: 'These *gai* are what I have, please take them.'

It was very important to raise finances for the movement spreading like wildfire



through the Indian and Indian-origin communities of Southeast Asia. The Chettians were one of the wealthiest expatriate Indian communities living in the region. Abid Hasan explained they were of south Indian [*usually Tamil-speaking, ed.*] origin, engaged in mercantile activities and usury – sort of like Marwaris but from the south of India, as he described them. One day, the head priest of Singapore's Chettian temple turned up at Netaji's residence on Meyer Road, accompanied by a couple of other notables of the community. The priest and his companions had no appointment but barged in – the guards at the gate did not stop the man of religion from entering. Abid Hasan received them and they requested a *darshan* of Netaji. Abid Hasan hesitated for a moment and then took them in to see Netaji. The visitors were wearing *dhotis*, and their upper bodies were bare except for an *uttariya* [*a long scarf-like piece of cloth with embroidery worn slung around the neck, ed.*]. Before entering Netaji's room, they tied the *uttariyas* around their waists, as if they were entering a temple. Then they stood in front of Netaji, hands folded in the traditional gesture of respect.

The visitors had come with a request. They wished Netaji to grace the celebration of Dussehra [*the autumnal festival which marks the triumph of good over evil, ed.*] at their community temple, the day after next. Abid Hasan felt elated. He sensed an opportunity to tap the Chettian community's ample coffers for the movement's needs. But to his dismay, Netaji lost his temper and reacted badly. He brusquely told the priest and his companions that he would not set foot in a temple where he knew Hindus of lower castes, not to speak of Indians of other religious faiths, were not permitted entry. Thus dismissed, the Chettians went away. The news of the incident spread immediately through the INA barracks and most of the officers and men were happy that Netaji had rebuffed the snobbish Chettians.

On the morning of Dussehra, the priest and his companions turned up again at Netaji's residence. A detachment of Garhwali troops, who tend to be devout, were on guard duty that day and once again the Chettians breached the gate. This time, Abid Hasan tried to get rid of them forthwith, but they begged for an audience and he relented. The priest and his companions then told Netaji that the community's leadership had decided that all Indians, irrespective of caste and creed, would attend the Dussehra gathering at the temple. Could he please come and address the gathering?

It was Abid Hasan's first experience inside a Hindu temple. The compound was packed to capacity when they arrived. On one side, there were Malay Muslims in black caps. There was a huge throng of INA officers and men – Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian – and of civilian activists of the Indian Independence League (IIL), of varied religious and ethnolinguistic backgrounds. The Chettian community's



leaders escorted Netaji and his entourage of civilian and military colleagues to the temple's sanctum sanctorum. At its entrance, Abid Hasan hesitated. But the head priest gave him a gentle but firm push on the back and he went in. At this point of the narration, Abid Hasan paused, grinned impishly and said: 'Of course, I don't know if they washed the temple precincts afterwards!'

Inside the sanctum sanctorum, Abid Hasan watched Netaji closely. Abid had no idea what to do. They were all handed coconuts and some other things needed for worship. The rituals over, the priest marked Netaji's forehead, and Abid Hasan's as well, with *tilaks*.

As soon as they exited into the compound, Netaji wiped the tilak off his forehead. Abid Hasan followed his example and did likewise. Then Netaji addressed the gathering. Abid Hasan believes this was one of Netaji's finest speeches ever – delivered truly extempore, without any prior preparation whatsoever. He regrets that the speech was not recorded for history and posterity. *[In January 1979, three years after this interview in Calcutta with Krishna Bose, Abid Hasan wrote an article titled 'Netaji and the Indian Communal Question' for the very first issue of The Oracle, the quarterly journal of Netaji Research Bureau edited by the Bureau's director, Dr Sisir Bose. In the article, he recalled some elements of what Netaji said in the speech at Singapore's Chettiar temple in autumn 1943 from memory: 'I have always denied that there is communalism among the Indian masses, as asserted by the imperialists and some self-seeking Indians serving their cause. We are one, whatever our individual religion. I congratulate the priests of this temple for giving us the opportunity to demonstrate that today.' Ed.]*

Upon arriving in Singapore, Netaji spoke individually to all the senior INA officers. A minimum of half an hour was allotted for each officer. In Germany, the number of activists was relatively small and they had easy access to Netaji's time, with discussions often lasting hours. Here, the situation was very different and time was at a premium. Even so, Netaji got personally acquainted with every senior officer.

Then, he started visiting various INA units in their camps and barracks. The unit concerned would be told in advance so they would be ready and everything kept spick and span for the visit. However, Netaji focused on different things on different visits. Sometimes he would ask to see the kitchen. When he discovered that food was being cooked separately for the officers and the ordinary soldiers, he expressed his displeasure in no uncertain terms. During a lunchtime visit, he would join the soldiers as they queued for food. It was obviously not possible to meet every soldier individually. But the fact that Netaji was eating with them and sharing their food had a great impact on the soldiers' morale. On other visits, he would disregard the kitchen and enquire what medical facilities were available to the soldiers.



We already know the main events after Netaji's arrival in Singapore – including the proclamation of the Provisional Government of Free India on 21 October 1943 – in some detail. But Abid Hasan has unique knowledge of Netaji's daily routine because they lived in the same house, and he accompanied Netaji to work every day and returned with him.

Netaji would get up at dawn and do *puja*. This was his private time. A small-sized Bhagavad Gita and some prayer beads were there in his bedroom. Kundan Singh, his personal valet, knew to enter the bedroom only after the morning prayer was done.

Abid Hasan had agreed with Netaji that he would go to bed by midnight – Netaji continued working till much later – so he could get some sleep and start helping Netaji from the early morning. But he still had difficulty keeping up with the frenetic routine. He recalls occasions when Netaji was already seated in the car, perhaps to go to the IIL headquarters, while Abid Hasan ran behind him, shoes in hand. Abid would put on the shoes in the car.

The food served at the Meyer Road house was very simple fare because Netaji was insistent that he would eat only what was available to all INA soldiers. However, when guests came to dinner, special arrangements were made. Abid Hasan was in charge of running the household and managing its expenses. Everyone would contribute a fraction of their salary to the household purse, but this did not go very far. Abid Hasan says, laughing, that his monthly salary was just about enough to buy three chickens in wartime Singapore.

On returning home in the late afternoon, Netaji played badminton. His regular partner was Raju, his personal physician. Various INA officers would drop by every day and they too joined the game. Then in the early evening, the house became crowded with visitors.

In Rangoon, from January 1944 onwards, the pattern of daily life was much the same. But the household in Rangoon was not as bustling as the one in Singapore. From Rangoon, the forward headquarters of the INA, units were regularly leaving for the front. Netaji saw every unit off personally as they made their way to the India border.

Abid Hasan suddenly recollected something about life in Rangoon that made him laugh aloud. After they arrived, Netaji's car, a somewhat aged model, would regularly break down. When word got around that Netaji and his secretary had been seen pushing the infirm car on Rangoon's streets, a wealthy Indian sent a spanking-new car for Netaji's use. Abid Hasan felt relieved that the problem had been resolved. But then, when an INA commander headed to the front came visiting, Netaji asked him about his transport. The officer provided a list of jeeps and trucks. Netaji



said: 'Well, but you need a staff car too, don't you? Take mine; it's in good condition.' The next day, Abid Hasan and Netaji were back to pushing the old car on the streets of Rangoon. This sequence of events repeated itself a few times, as Netaji gave away new cars gifted to him to frontline officers.

In early November 1943, the Greater East Asia Conference took place in Tokyo. Abid Hasan flew with Netaji to Tokyo from Singapore. There Abid got to meet other Asian leaders, including Jose P. Laurel of the Philippines, Dr Ba Maw of Burma and Prince Wan Waithayakon of Thailand. The summit was attended by seven heads of government in all, of whom Subhas Chandra Bose, the head of the newly proclaimed Provisional Government of Azad Hind, attended as an 'observer'. But Netaji, who cut a striking figure in military uniform, complete with cap and knee-high boots, stole the show with his presence and rousing speeches. Abid Hasan recalls Prince Waithayakon saying that after meeting Mr Bose, he now fully understood what it means to have a commanding personality. In footage of the Tokyo summit, Abid Hasan is clearly visible next to Netaji, arranging his papers and so on.

On the way back from Tokyo to Singapore, Netaji and the Indian delegation made a stop in Shanghai. There was a significant community of Sikhs in Shanghai, all loyal to the Azad Hind cause. They organized a huge reception for Netaji. Netaji returned to Singapore, but Abid Hasan stayed on in Shanghai for some days. The cover story for his continuing presence in Shanghai was that he had been tasked to resolve rivalries between leaders of three gurdwaras in the city. But the real reason was that Netaji had entrusted Abid Hasan with a secret mission.

The hostilities between Japan and China had been bothering Netaji for a long time. He was sympathetic to China. As Congress president in 1938, it was he who organized the 'Congress Medical Mission' to China. He also publicly and severely criticized Japan's aggression against China, which had escalated from 1937. Netaji knew very well that the ideal of Asian solidarity would remain hollow while Japan and China remained at loggerheads, and he would often speak to Japanese leaders about de-escalating their war in China.

So he wanted to reach out to the Chinese Nationalists led by Chiang Kai-Shek. He gave Abid Hasan a secret message for Chiang, to be delivered in Nanking. Abid Hasan was to proceed from Shanghai to Nanking to deliver the message, once a signal from Nanking was received. But Abid Hasan waited in vain; the signal from Nanking did not come. Chiang Kai-Shek was by this time the fourth member of the 'Big Four', along with Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill. Abid Hasan did eventually make a trip to Nanking, but the secret mission was a failure.

**Chalo Dilli!**



In 1944, Abid Hasan finally realized a longstanding wish: to go to war, gun in hand, to fight as a soldier for India's freedom.

Abid Hasan, who had been inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and served time in jail in India for participating in the Indian National Congress's civil disobedience movement, had nurtured this wish since first meeting Netaji in Berlin in May 1941. It was what led him to join the Indian Legion in Germany and acquire military training in 1942. But he had not got the opportunity to put this training to use since arriving in East Asia with Netaji in May 1943. What he had got instead was a degree of proximity to Subhas Chandra Bose that was unequalled by any other individual in the Azad Hind movement in Europe or in Asia. After working in Berlin's Free India Centre, Netaji had selected him as his only companion for the perilous voyage by submarine from Europe to East Asia. After arriving in Asia, he had practically been Netaji's shadow, working as his round-the-clock secretary as well as his household manager in Singapore and Rangoon. Abid Hasan had been an eyewitness, in the most immediate and powerful sense of the word, to the making of history.

How many people can relate anecdotes of Netaji at his breakfast table in Singapore? One morning, Netaji was eating a simple breakfast of *puris* (puffed Indian bread) with vegetables when an older member of the Azad Hind Government's council of ministers dropped in for a consultation. Netaji instantly invited the gentleman to join him for breakfast and pushed his own plate in his direction. The visitor was about to pick up a *puri* from Netaji's plate when Abid Hasan gently tugged at the gentleman's sleeve and stopped him. Abid then called out to a member of the domestic staff: '*Soand-so saab aya hai; aur ek thali lao.*' (So-and-so sir has come; bring another plate.) After the gentleman departed, Netaji scolded Abid Hasan for the intervention. Abid Hasan was unrepentant. He felt that some limits should be maintained, and people however important should not eat directly off Netaji's plate. It was the same duty of care he showed towards Netaji when he cooked Netaji *khichuri*, the rice-and-lentil mix, on the German U-boat in early 1943. Where Netaji's welfare was concerned, Abid Hasan was uncompromising and, if necessary, assertive. The assertiveness, and sometimes his naughty antics such as keeping kittens in the Singapore house unbeknownst to Netaji, often earned him scolding from his boss and leader. Abid Hasan, himself a straight-talker, did not mind in the least. And he was determined to one day fulfil his ambition of fighting as a soldier in the final war of Indian independence.

It was May 1944. The INA's First Division had thrust into northeast India in the third week of March – the first INA units entered Indian soil on 18 March 1944 – and in April there was intense fighting close to Imphal, as well as in and around Kohima. On 14 April 1944, the INA special forces in the vanguard of the attack – the



Bahadur Group commanded by Colonel Shaukat Malik – raised the national tri-colour at Moirang in the Imphal valley of Manipur. Abid Hasan was not going to pass up this opportunity for frontline combat. He volunteered for the First Division and joined at the rank of Major. The First Division had four regiments: the Gandhi Brigade, the Azad Brigade, the Nehru Brigade and the Subhas Brigade.

Abid Hasan travelled from Rangoon to Tamu – a Burmese border town just across from the Manipur town of Moreh. There he met with Mohammad Zaman Kiani, the commander of the First Division. Kiani was a bit sceptical of whether Abid Hasan could command battlefield troops. The First Division consisted largely of veterans of the British-Indian army, professional military men. Almost all the officers commanding units at various levels – M. Z. Kiani himself included – fell in this category, as did the bulk of the ordinary soldiers. Many of the senior officers came from military families which had served in the British-Indian army for two or even three generations. In Kiani's eyes, Abid Hasan was a civilian and lacked combat experience, and he was not sure what sort of training Abid had received from his Wehrmacht instructors in Germany.

But as fate would have it, within weeks Abid Hasan would lead INA troops in battle in the hills of Manipur.

By May, the tide of the war had already turned against the Indian National Army. There were three adverse factors at work: the early onset of torrential monsoon rains, the complete domination of the skies by the air power of the British and their American allies, and the INA frontline units' severely overstretched supply lines from Burma through daunting terrain of hilly jungles. The INA's Gandhi Brigade – commanded by Colonel Inayat Jan Kiani, a relative of M. Z. Kiani's – was operating in rugged terrain southeast of Imphal, in an area lying between the Imphal valley and the Burma border.

At the end of April, a Gandhi Brigade force of several hundred men led by Pritam Singh launched a fierce attack on the British airfield located in Palel, close to the Imphal valley, but were eventually repelled. *[At the beginning of July, Col. I. J. Kiani's soldiers overran the Palel airfield, destroyed enemy aircraft there and held it for several days, but this came too late to make a difference to the Imphal campaign. Ed.]* Then, the Gandhi Brigade suffered a damaging desertion to the enemy. The brigade's second-in-command, a Major Garewal, deserted his troops and went over to the enemy, carrying maps and charts which showed the precise locations of INA units, their strength and battlefield plans. By June, the situation had turned critical and the Gandhi Brigade's soldiers were on the verge of starvation, surviving on boiled grass and leaves foraged from the forests. But the British did not know how vulnerable their situation was. They would fire artillery and generally desist from



infantry advances. Now they knew everything, from the information provided by Garewal.

It was in this situation that Major Abid Hasan took command of four companies of the INA's beleaguered Gandhi Brigade in the hills of southeastern Manipur. Three of the four company commanders were Sikhs. All three wept inconsolably when they met their new commanding officer, Abid Hasan. They were mortified that a fellow Sikh, Garewal, had betrayed them. They vowed that if even one Sikh soldier of the Gandhi Brigade survived the war, revenge would be exacted. In fact, Garewal did not have long to live. Some months after the end of World War II and the repatriation to India of tens of thousands of INA soldiers and their subsequent release, Garewal was waylaid and killed in rather brutal circumstances on a street in Lahore, his hometown.

Abid Hasan's first concern was to change positions and dig new trenches, since their established positions had been compromised. But the soldiers under his command demurred. Abid Hasan recalls that they were physically weak from lack of food, surviving on small rations of rice mixed with salt. The Punjabi soldiers in his unit did not like rice anyway – they were pounding the rice into rotis and eating that. The soldiers told Abid Hasan that they wanted to confront the *dushman* (enemy) with the remaining strength in their bodies, rather than expend that on changing positions and digging new trenches. 'So what if they know our positions?' they told him. 'Now we too know where and how they will attack us.'

After some thought, Abid Hasan agreed. He selected two soldiers – a Sikh and a Rajput – and sent them forward to construct an observation post (OP) atop a tall tree to detect the enemy's movements. He then organized a three-tier defence against the inevitable enemy offensive. The first two tiers would tactically resist the enemy advance, but he concentrated most of his forces in the third tier.

Abid Hasan recalls that he would get up every day at the crack of dawn. His first task was to get rid of leeches from his uniform and various parts of his body. He would then take stock of the situation on the frontline.

One morning, the observation post reported that the enemy were on the move. Soon the first-tier defence line was attacked; then the second tier too came under attack. Abid Hasan and hundreds of soldiers took up position in the third, crucial, defence line. They could hear the enemy artillery firing, and the noise gradually increased as the enemy approached.

At that point, Abid Hasan recalls, he looked up from his trench and said: Oh God, this is really not fair! The sunny morning sky was blue, and an enemy warplane was swooping towards their trenches. They were looking forward to taking on the enemy in ground combat, but it looked like they would be bombed from the air



before that happened. A prayer for divine intervention welled up in Abid's heart. 'Look, I know this sounds unbelievable, but my prayer was answered. Suddenly, a black cloud came floating across the crystal-clear sky. In the next ten or fifteen minutes, the sky turned dark and a drizzling rain began. The plane disappeared.'

The morale of the INA troops rose. On Abid Hasan's order, they charged the advancing enemy forces. The INA soldiers were equipped only with rifles, hand grenades and some Bren guns (a light machine gun of British make), but in close-range combat the enemy's artillery was useless. About 600 soldiers of the Azad Hind Fauj took on 3,000 British troops led by a battalion of the Seaforth Highlanders, a crack regiment of the British Army drawn from men of the Scottish highlands. It was a rout, and a morale-raising tactical victory for the INA and its Gandhi Brigade. The Seaforth Highlanders retreated, leaving their dead behind. Abid Hasan recalls that a platoon commander called Pritam Singh – a namesake of the officer who had led the assault on the Palel airfield in end-April – was among those who fought with incredible courage in the battle.

I asked Abid Hasan the exact location of this battle. He said: 'Mithangkuna.' I queried whether it might be Ningthoukhong. When Sisir and I went to Manipur in 1972, we visited Ningthoukhong, a large village between Moirang and Imphal [*Ningthoukhong is a town in the present-day Bishnupur district of Manipur. ed.*], which was devastated in June 1944 in fighting between the British and the Japanese and INA forces who were attacking Imphal. But Abid Hasan said: 'No, no, Mithangkuna.' British war histories will not mention this battle, he said, because their vaunted Seaforth Highlanders regiment suffered a severe defeat there. [*Ningthoukhong lies in the Imphal valley. The location Abid Hasan referred to as 'Mithangkuna' is in fact Mittong Khunou, which lies in the Manipur hills southeast of the Imphal valley. Eight INA personnel were decorated with gallantry awards, some posthumously, for their bravery in the battle of Mittong Khunou in June 1944. Major Pritam Singh, Lieutenant Ajaib Singh, Lieutenant Mansukh Lal, Lieutenant Taj Mohammad, Lieutenant Lal Singh and Captain Rama Rao received the Sardar-e-Jung award. Captain Sadhu Singh received the Vir-e-Hind award, and Sepoy Kehar Singh the Sher-e-Hind award. Ed.*]

The soldiers under Abid Hasan's command had told him, jokingly, that he must treat them to a feast if they won the battle. They reminded him of that. I naively asked: 'So, did you treat them?' Abid Hasan looked at me and said: 'My dear Krishna.' A treat was out of the question. The limited rations had run out and the men were surviving on boiled grass and leaves, wild fruits, and water from local streams and waterfalls.

In the second week of July, the order was given to INA units to retreat into Burma. 'How did you feel when you heard about the order?' I asked Abid Hasan. He



replied: 'Well, if Mohammad doesn't come to the mountain, the mountain has to go to Mohammad. Since food was not reaching us, we had to go to the food.'

I asked Abid Hasan if he met Fujiwara Iwaichi – the Japanese officer who was instrumental in the formation of the INA in Singapore in February 1942 – in Manipur. Fujiwara was there for a while, at the Tengnoupal Pass which is close to where Abid Hasan was deployed. Fujiwara had told us that he would hear cries of '*Chalo Dilli! Chalo Dilli!*' in the darkness of the night. Abid Hasan said no; Fujiwara had left by the time he arrived.

The retreat was an almost unimaginable ordeal. Trekking through hilly jungles in continuous rain, many hundreds fell by the wayside – stricken by malaria, dysentery, diarrhoea and other diseases or simply overcome by hunger, thirst and exhaustion. Abid Hasan tried to cope psychologically with the terrible conditions by remembering what Netaji had said: victory was ultimately inevitable and their just cause would prevail. They had been defeated but this was just the first round.

Major Akbar Ali Shah, the only doctor in Abid Hasan's unit, fell sick with typhus and died on the way. Before he died, he told Abid: 'Please say "Jai Hind" to Netaji from me.' It was his last wish. A weakened Garhwali soldier was having difficulty walking while carrying his rifle. But soldier's pride intact, he refused to part with his weapon until he was practically forced to do so by Abid Hasan. Seeing that, a Sikh soldier called Arjun Singh lamented that they had not died fighting on the battlefield. Once they reached the town of Kalewa, on the bank of the Chindwin river, Cherian, a cheerful youth recruited from Malaya, collapsed and passed away.

After crossing the Chindwin, the unit was able to get some edibles in a village. The men were famished and started gobbling the foodstuffs without bothering to cook first. At that time, Arjun Singh lost his mental balance. Abid Hasan found him staring blankly at a glass of milk he had been given. He kept saying: '*Doodh. Major saab, doodh.*' Everyone was eating around him but he did not partake and kept repeating this. Finally, he was fed the milk and put to sleep. But the traumatized soldier never fully recovered his mind.

At last, they reached the city of Mandalay. Almost as soon as they arrived, they were told that Netaji was on his way from Rangoon, 400 miles to the south, to see them. Immediately, the men perked up. Abid Hasan noticed that the Sikhs started tending their beards and the Rajputs their moustaches.

When Netaji started speaking, slowly at first, to the gathering of soldiers, a 'miracle' happened – as Abid Hasan put it. The crushed spirits of the emaciated men revived as though by a magic wand. Netaji told the soldiers he would not be able to embrace each and every one of them individually, but he would embrace all their officers. The officers, in turn, would embrace the men under their command.



During interrogation after the end of the war a year later, a British intelligence officer asked an INA officer what they had got in return for so much hardship and suffering. The INA officer replied: 'Netaji embraced me.'

At Mandalay, Netaji spoke individually to all the officers who had returned from the front. When Abid Hasan's turn came, Netaji said to him: 'Hasan, I have the feeling that no one is telling me the whole truth of what you have suffered. You have been close to me for a long time – please tell me the whole truth.'

Abid Hasan was placed in a quandary. Then he told Netaji what a Japanese officer had said to him in Manipur two months earlier: 'The situation is slightly not so very good.' Netaji just sat in silence for a few minutes.

### **The Last Journey**

When Japan's surrender was announced on 15 August 1945, Abid Hasan was in Bangkok. Netaji arrived in Bangkok from Singapore. He told Abid Hasan: 'Get ready, you will have to accompany me.'

There was something to take care of before departing Bangkok. Abid Hasan went into a room in the house where Netaji stayed on visits to Bangkok, and closed the door. That room had a large box filled with gold and precious gemstones, donated by Indians and Indian-origin people in Southeast Asia to the coffers of the Azad Hind movement. With the help of two orderlies, Ramchandra and Allah Ditta, Abid Hasan went through the collection and neatly packed it all in two trunks.

On the morning of 17 August 1945, Subhas Chandra Bose and his companions flew out of Bangkok to Saigon in two planes. The Indian companions were six in number: Mr S. A. Ayer, Mr Debnath Das, Colonel Habib-ur Rahman, Colonel Gulzara Singh, Colonel Pritam Singh and Major Abid Hasan. Other colleagues saw them off at the airport, many in tears. Netaji embraced all of them individually.

The first plane had Netaji on board along with Habib, Pritam, Mr Ayer and a Japanese officer. The second plane carried General Saburo Isoda (Japan's liaison officer with the INA), Teruo Hachiya, Japan's ambassador to the Azad Hind Government, Gulzara Singh, Debnath Das and Abid Hasan. Netaji disembarking from the plane at Saigon airport on 17 August 1945 is his last known photograph. [*There is film footage of this as well and Netaji cuts a dashing figure, radiating confidence. Ed.*] In Saigon, they were put up at the house of Narayan Das, a member of the local branch of the Indian Independence League. Netaji's arrival in Saigon had been kept secret. Just one Indian gentleman, also an IIL member, was present at the airport to receive them and took them to the house.

Isoda and Hachiya went on immediately to Dalat, north of Saigon in Vietnam's central highlands, to the headquarters of Field Marshal Terauchi, the



commander-in-chief of Japanese forces in Southeast Asia. Their objective was to arrange a plane as quickly as possible for Netaji's onward journey.

They all rested in the afternoon, and Netaji dozed off for a while. Then news came that a plane was about to take off from Saigon airport, but its destination was unknown. After some more time, Isoda, Hachiya and an officer on Terauchi's staff came to the house. They brought news of another plane that was departing soon from Saigon airport. It was going to Tokyo with some papers related to Japan's formal surrender [*which happened on 2 September 1945, ed.*]. They said that it was now two days after the surrender announcement and it was dangerous for Japanese planes to be in the sky, but since this plane was carrying surrender-related documents, it should be safe.

This is the first time we heard that the plane in which Netaji flew out of Saigon on 17 August was going to Tokyo, with papers related to the surrender. This bit of Abid Hasan's narrative doesn't match with what S. A. Ayer [*the minister for publicity and propaganda in the Azad Hind Government, ed.*] had told Sisir and myself earlier. Mr Ayer told us that there was no explicit discussion as such about where the plane was going or what Netaji's final destination would be, but they knew that Netaji was headed to Manchuria. Indeed, Lieutenant General Shidei of the Japanese Army, who travelled with Netaji from Saigon and was killed instantly on 18 August 1945 when the plane crashed on take-off after refuelling at Taihoku (Taipei) airport, was travelling to Manchuria. Perhaps this difference in Ayer and Abid Hasan's accounts is due to the fact that only Habib-ur Rahman was in the room with Netaji when the Japanese officials came to inform them about the departing plane, so the others did not know the destination for sure.

At first, only one seat was available on the departing plane – for Netaji himself. After some persuasion, the Japanese agreed to accommodate a second Indian passenger. Netaji then decided that Habib would accompany him, and the other five would follow as soon as possible. They all set out for Saigon airport in two cars. The first car carried Netaji, Habib and Ayer. Abid Hasan, Debnath Das, Gulzara Singh and Pritam Singh rode in the second car. Mr Ayer and Gulzara Singh took their luggage along, just in case one or two more seats could be obtained on the plane.

The car with Netaji went off at speed. But the second car got held up in Saigon's crowds and traffic and fell behind. When Netaji reached the airport, the plane [*a Japanese bomber converted to carry passengers and cargo, ed.*] was waiting on the tarmac with its engines on. General Shidei had been waiting for two hours. Netaji became impatient. But the two trunks Abid Hasan had packed in Bangkok were in the second car! And the contents of those trunks were needed for the future movement. So Netaji had no option but to wait. The second car arrived a good half hour



after the first. It stopped almost at the door of the plane and the two trunks full of gold and gemstones were taken in. Netaji bade farewell to Isoda and Hachiya, and said 'Jai Hind!' to each of the five Indians.

Just as the plane's door was about to be closed, Abid Hasan shouted out: 'Sir! Sir!' He handed Netaji his gold cigarette case, a gift from Ribbentrop, the German foreign minister. As the plane taxied down the runway, Abid remembered something else – Netaji's camera was slung over his shoulder. 'Sir! Sir!' No, it was too late. [*Netaji's plane made an overnight halt at Danang, a coastal city in central Vietnam about 500 miles north of Saigon, before flying onward to Taipei the next day. Danang was known then by its French name, Touraine. Ed.*]

S. A. Ayer, Debnath Das, Abid Hasan, Gulzara Singh and Pritam Singh returned from Saigon airport in a sad mood after seeing Netaji off. But they were determined to follow him as quickly as possible, as he had instructed. In the late afternoon of 18 August, they went to the Japanese headquarters in Saigon to enquire about flights, but there was nothing available. On the evening of 19 August, Ayer and Das went there again. On this occasion, they noticed that the Japanese were acting excessively friendly towards them, but of course did not know the reason.

This time, the Japanese arranged for them to depart from Saigon. The next day, 20 August, there was a plane going to Tokyo which had one seat available, and it was decided that Mr Ayer would take this flight. The other four were offered seats on a plane going to Hanoi on 20 August. At Hanoi, they would have to arrange for their onward journey to Tokyo.

On the morning of 20 August 1945, the plane to Hanoi departed first, with Abid Hasan, Debnath Das, Gulzara Singh and Pritam Singh on board. They left S. A. Ayer waiting at the airport for the departure of the plane to Tokyo.

### **Remembering Netaji**

The day of Abid Hasan's departure arrived. His Calcutta-Hyderabad flight was in the early morning. The previous night, he told me I should not get up to see him off and said his goodbyes. Just before dawn, I tapped on the door of his room on the ground floor of our house, overlooking the back garden, and handed him a cup of tea. There were footsteps on the staircase – our children were coming down. I knew we would all miss Abid Hasan. He is wonderful company, a man of natural charm. He is gregarious and his sense of humour is infectious. Full of good cheer, his presence had as always filled our home with fun and laughter. He has a capacity to take life with positivity and very frequently with a dollop of wit. He has always been like that. S. A. Ayer has likened him to P. G. Wodehouse's character Archie. My older son Sugata drove him to the airport, and Sisir went to see Abid Hasan off. I stayed



behind with our younger son Sumantra, then seven. I said goodbye to him on our front verandah. It was still dark. I heard his voice saying 'Jai Hind, Jai Hind' and then he was gone.

In Hanoi, Abid Hasan was given sanctuary in the house of an Indian businessman. Abid gave Netaji's camera to the man for safekeeping. Mr Ayer had given Abid some gold, for use in the dangerous times that surely lay ahead, and Abid Hasan gave the man some of that as well. Some months later, Abid Hasan met the Hanoi businessman again in Calcutta. At that time, Abid Hasan recalls, he was literally penniless and the man helped him. Abid Hasan told him to deliver the camera to Sarat Chandra Bose, but he does not know if the man did so. Abid Hasan stayed for some time at Sarat Bose's 1 Woodburn Park house in Calcutta during that visit.

At the conclusion of our marathon interview in 1976, I felt I should ask Abid Hasan when he heard the news of the plane crash at Taipei airport. He replied that he heard on arrival in Hanoi [*so probably on 20 August 1945, two days after the crash, Ed.*]. I hesitated to ask how he had felt on hearing the terrible news, but then did so. Abid Hasan replied: 'Well, I heard it out and digested it. But later I came to the conclusion that the air crash is not true.'

Abid Hasan firmly believes that Netaji is no more, and has held that belief for a long time. But he also believes the air crash to be not true. I quizzed him a bit about this unusual position. Those who believe Netaji is still alive obviously reject the air crash, and those who accept the air crash as a tragic fact obviously accept his death.

I then raised one matter with Abid Hasan. According to Colonel Habib-ur Rahman's testimony, when he and Netaji were lying injured side by side – Netaji mortally so – in the Japanese military hospital in Taihoku (Taipei) after the crash, Netaji was drifting in and out of consciousness. Netaji spoke several times during those few hours. On one of those occasions, Habib has said, Netaji mumbled: 'Hasan, Hasan.' Habib – whose burn wounds were relatively light – then went to Netaji's bedside and said: '*Hasan yahaan nahin hai, sahab; main hoon, Habib.*' (Hasan is not here, sir; I am, Habib.)

'Doesn't this strike you as uncannily plausible?' I queried Abid Hasan. 'You were the one who was almost always with him, like a shadow, from the beginning of the submarine journey in Kiel in February 1943 and then in Tokyo, Singapore, Rangoon etc. Isn't it rather plausible that on his death bed, critically injured, he would say your name?'

Abid Hasan listened in silence. After a long pause, he said, slowly: 'You know, Krishna, I could have been his companion on that journey [from Saigon]. I am sure that had I been in a civilian position in the movement, as before, he would have



taken me. But since 1944, I was in the army and held a military rank. Habib was senior to me so Netaji rightly took him. But you never know, it could have been me. In that case, I would have been with him.'

Then Abid Hasan said: 'No, I still believe he is long gone but the air crash is not true.'

In January 1984 [*just a few months before he suddenly passed away in Hyderabad at the age of seventy-two, ed.*], Abid Hasan came to stay with us again at our 90 Sarat Bose Road house in Calcutta. He came to attend the 23rd January celebration of Netaji's birth anniversary at Netaji Bhawan, 38/2 Lala Lajpat Rai Sarani (Elgin Road). The lunch for the guests after the traditional late-morning assembly at Netaji Bhawan was in the rooftop garden of a seven-storeyed building in downtown Calcutta. It was a lovely setting; the rooftop garden was ablaze with winter flowers. Abid Hasan liked it. He gave me a short lecture on the different flowers.

Standing in the rooftop garden, I told Abid Hasan that I had written up the marathon interview of 1976 for publication [*in Bengali, ed.*], but was unsure how to end it. He said: 'Well, how do you want to end it?' I replied: 'I think I want to end it at Saigon airport on 17 August 1945, when you saw Netaji for the last time.'

S. A. Ayer has written very poignantly about seeing Netaji off at Saigon airport on 17 August 1945. Mr Ayer says he had a premonition that he was saying 'Jai Hind' to Netaji for the last time. It was not that he expected any harm to come to Netaji. Ayer felt that he himself might not survive to meet and greet Netaji again.

When I reminded Abid Hasan how S. A. Ayer has recollected his last moments with Netaji, the typical impish grin appeared on his face. He said: 'Well, you can write that at that last send-off at Saigon airport, Abid Hasan got the same treatment from Netaji that he was used to receiving.'

'What's that?' I asked in surprise. 'A scolding, of course,' Abid Hasan replied. When the trunks with the 'treasure' were being loaded onto the plane, Netaji turned to him and said angrily: 'Why are you so late? What were you doing?' Of course, the delay in reaching the airport was not Abid Hasan's fault at all, but he quietly took the scolding, as always.

I told Abid Hasan that there is a Bengali folk proverb which, roughly translated, says that those who love you are the only ones entitled to scold you: *Sashan kora tarei shajey, sohag koray je go*. Abid Hasan broke into laughter. He said: 'Krishna, I don't know about that. That's your interpretation.'

## Notes

*Krishna Bose passed away on 22 February 2020, aged eighty-nine. On 23 January 2021, Netaji's 124th birth anniversary, Netaji Research Bureau was honoured to confer its*



*Netaji Award posthumously on Abid Hasan for his magnificent and outstanding contributions to the struggle for India's freedom.*

*This article is a translation by Sumantra Bose of 'Sainiker Smriti' (A Soldier's Memories), the Bengali article Krishna Bose wrote on the basis of her 1976 interview with Abid Hasan, which was published in the Bengali magazine Desh in the 1980s. The Bengali article was re-published in Prasanga Subhaschandra (On Subhaschandra), an anthology of Krishna Bose's articles on various facets of Netaji and of the INA written between the early 1960s and the early 1990s, which appeared in 1993. A transcription of the 1976 tape recording was published in the 1980s in The Oracle, the NRB's quarterly journal. Ed.*



Netaji's Soldiers

Remembering the Brave



## MOHAMMAD ZAMAN KIANI

In 1935, a young man of twenty-four graduated from the newly established Indian Military Academy at Dehradun – modelled on England's Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. His name was Mohammad Zaman Kiani. Kiani graduated from the thirty-month course at the top of his class, winning the 'sword of honour' and the gold medal given to the most outstanding cadet. Kiani was commissioned into the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 14<sup>th</sup> Punjab Regiment. A glittering career in the British-Indian army lay before the youth. Born in a village in the Rawalpindi district, he had lost his parents at the age of ten.

Fate ordained otherwise. During World War II, M. Z. Kiani would become the seniormost field officer of the Indian National Army under the leadership of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. He commanded the INA's First Division, which fought on the Manipur and Nagaland fronts in the battles of Imphal and Kohima. The First Division fielded three regiments in India – the Gandhi Brigade led by Inayat Jan Kiani (who happened to be Zaman's cousin), the Azad Brigade led by Gulzara Singh, and the Subhas Brigade commanded by Shah Nawaz Khan. Braving many adversities, the soldiers of these formations fought with exceptional courage and determination. Their heroism and sacrifices must never be forgotten.

Until 1941, Kiani's battalion was headquartered in the town of Bannu in the North-West Frontier Province. His first experiences in combat were in skirmishes with the tribal warriors of present-day north and south Waziristan, which lie between Bannu and the Durand Line, the border with Afghanistan. Kiani has written in his memoirs that in the tribal areas 'between the settled districts of the NWFP and the Durand Line, no king's writ had ever run'. The tribesmen, he writes, were 'formidable foes, extremely brave and fierce fighters and masterful tacticians as guerrillas'. Captain Kiani's battalion had two other officers who were destined for fame. One was Captain Mohan Singh, who became the leader of the first INA formed in Singapore in 1942. The other was Captain Mohammad Ayub Khan, who became the Pakistan Army's commander-in-chief and then ruled Pakistan as its military dictator from 1958 to 1969.





Netaji taking the salute at the massive INA parade in Singapore, 5 July 1943.

Mohammad Zaman Kiani is next to him.

In April 1941, Kiani's unit was among British-Indian forces which set sail from



Bombay. By this time, Kiani had been promoted to the rank of Major. For reasons of secrecy, their destination was disclosed to them only after twenty-four hours at sea. Kiani was very disappointed to learn that they were headed not to the active war theatres of Europe and North Africa, but to Malaya. This was eight months before Japan attacked Pearl Harbour and the war broke out in Asia in December 1941.

Kiani was stationed in Penang and Ipoh in northern Malaya. He has written in his memoirs that the British were woefully ill-prepared to counter the lightning Japanese offensive. The highly mobile Japanese attacked the British-Indian forces from the flanks and even the rear. The British-Indian forces retreated in chaotic conditions down the Malayan peninsula from the Thai border. As the rout unfolded, Kiani had another realization – that it was difficult to fight without a strong motivation. This was a British war to preserve their empire, in which Indian soldiers were being used and expended as cannon fodder.

On 14 February 1942, the British Malaya Command decided to surrender at Singapore as the Japanese closed in. Kiani was present on behalf of his battalion when the decision to surrender was taken. Two days later, on 17 February, a huge number of Indian officers and rank-and-file soldiers – some 45,000 in all – were formally turned over by their British commanders to the Japanese as prisoners of war at Singapore's Farrer Park. The forlorn gathering of defeated soldiers was electrified when Major Fujiwara Iwaichi, representing the victorious Japanese, told them that they were not prisoners of war, and invited them to form a liberation army that would fight for India's independence from British rule. Thus began Mohammad Zaman Kiani's career as a soldier for India's freedom.



A partial view of the 15,000 INA soldiers massed on Singapore's Padang (Maidan), 5 July 1943





Netaji inspecting the INA troops in Singapore, 5 July 1943. M. Z. Kiani is beside him, behind his left shoulder.

The most memorable phase of that revolutionary career was from April to July of 1944. As Commander of the INA's First Division, Major General M. Z. Kiani established his headquarters in a village called Chamol in the Manipur hills, across the border from the Burmese town of Tamu. Under his direction, the Subhas Brigade led by Shah Nawaz Khan and his deputy, Col. Mahboob Ahmed, fought with distinction in the Haka-Falam sector on the Burma-Mizoram border. One of the Subhas Brigade's battalions, led by Col. Pitri Sharan (P.S.) Raturi, conducted daring operations on the Arakan border, where another INA commander, Major Lakshmi Shankar Mishra (later martyred in Burma in April 1945), had already achieved significant success in early 1944. Inayat Kiani's Gandhi Brigade launched an attack on the British airbase at Pateel in Manipur which destroyed at least half a dozen enemy planes in early July of 1944. Earlier, on 14 April 1944, a detachment of the Bahadur Group – INA special forces – led by Colonel Shaukat Malik raised the national tricolour (the Congress flag with the charkha in the centre) at Moirang in the Imphal valley.

After the string of early successes, the tide of the war turned as the torrential, unforgiving monsoon set in. The problems caused by the daunting terrain and over-extended supply lines were compounded by the total domination of the skies by Britain's ally, the Americans. Kiani writes with a trace of irony in his memoir that it was his fate to be at the receiving end of the enemy's air power – Japan's during the fighting in Malaya in end-1941 and early 1942 and the Allies' during the Imphal campaign in 1944. But, he writes, the INA troops showed almost unbelievable courage in adversity. Kiani makes particular note of the INA's civilian volunteers, who had mostly joined the liberation army after Netaji's arrival in Singapore in mid-1943. Winston Churchill had mockingly asked what Subhas Bose hoped to achieve by enlisting Tamil labourers from Malaya's rubber plantations – 'coolies', in his racist terminology – in the INA. They and the many other civilians from all walks



of life who had joined the INA fought just as tenaciously as their comrades who were from a professional military background, and hundreds were martyred in battle. For three months, April–June 1944, almost the entire southern half of Manipur, comprising 10,000-12,000 square kilometres, came under the authority of the Provisional Government of Free India, which Netaji had proclaimed in Singapore on 21 October 1943.



Netaji at a sports event in Singapore, 1943. M. Z. Kiani is seated next to him.





Netaji re-reads the declaration of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind – proclaimed on 21 October 1943 – on 18 March 1944, as the first INA units enter Indian soil from Burma. He is flanked on his right by M. Z. Kiani and A. C. Chatterji.



Netaji reading the proclamation of the Provisional Government of Free India in Singapore, 21 October 1943. Lakshmi Swaminathan is visible in the front row behind him.



The cabinet of the Provisional Government of Free India (*Arzi Hukumat-e-Azad Hind*). Singapore, October 1943.

The liberation army's retreat from India began in July 1944, through hilly jungle



amid unceasing rain and relentless strafing and bombing by enemy planes. Apart from the casualties of air attacks, a large number of INA soldiers died of sickness (malaria, typhus, dysentery) and from weakness caused by acute hunger during the retreat. The First Division retreated through Moreh, the Manipuri town on the Burma border, to the Burmese town of Kalewa on the Chindwin river. When dying soldiers were asked their names and regimental affiliation by doctors and nurses, some simply replied 'Jai Hind!' before passing away. Colonel Inayat Jan Kiani, the Gandhi Brigade's commander, was a very strong, robust man. After the months of hard combat followed by the gruelling retreat, he had become 'thin as a reed' and his uniform was tattered. But his fighting spirit was unbowed. He sang 'Old soldiers never die!' before fainting from exhaustion.

The surviving officers and rank-and-file soldiers of the INA formations which had fought in India were received with adulation when they arrived back in Rangoon, where the INA headquarters had moved from Singapore in January 1944. Rangoon had 'a large and generally affluent Indian community' and 'there were feasts and rallies at which eulogies were read and special dramas and dance shows organized for us,' M.Z. Kiani recalls. He especially remembers a 'very graceful' performance of classical Indian dance staged by Bengali girls. Poems praising Kiani's leadership were composed and recited in his presence at public felicitation ceremonies.

Mohammad Zaman Kiani writes in his memoirs that he felt very embarrassed. Here he was, having returned from defeat on the battlefield, only to be hailed as a 'military genius' and 'great commander' by Burma's Indian-origin population. One poem, composed by Mushtaq Randheri, described him as 'Kiani the brave, the lion of the field of battle'. At a civic reception in Rangoon, he was presented a sword with a silver scabbard; the scabbard had scenes from the Ramayana engraved on it. Karim Ghani, a prominent supporter of the Azad Hind movement, gave him a family heirloom, an antique gold pocket-watch. But the most treasured gift was from Netaji himself – a silver cigar box, 'duly inscribed'. Kiani realized that the reverses on the battlefield did not matter in the least to people fired by a burning urge for freedom. He felt revitalized.

In October 1944, Mohammad Zaman Kiani accompanied Netaji on a nearly one-month trip to Japan, which was spent mostly in Tokyo. The Indian delegation included the senior INA officers A. C. Chatterji and Habib-ur Rahman (the latter was Netaji's sole Indian companion on his last journey, which ended tragically in Taipei on 18 August 1945). The Indian visitors were warmly received and treated almost like royalty: 'All who came in contact with us were not only courteous and kind in the traditional Japanese manner, you could see worship and adoration in their eyes for Mr Subhas Chandra Bose.' When they departed from Tokyo's Imperial Hotel, 'all



the staff, lined up near our cars, were weeping and also bowing repeatedly'.

Kiani and the other senior officers accompanied Netaji to important meetings, including the one with General Koiso, the prime minister. They also called on General Hideki Tojo, the former prime minister, who had been very supportive of Netaji and the INA in 1943. The famous Japanese poet Yone Noguchi hosted Netaji and his officers at a traditional tea ceremony at his home. And in a very rare honour, Netaji was granted an audience with Emperor Hirohito. The audience was a private one, but Kiani and the other officers accompanied Netaji to the palace and wrote their names in the visitors' book.





Netaji during a visit to Tokyo, October 1944. Behind him (L to R) Major Generals A. C. Chatterji and Mohammad Zaman Kiani, and Colonel Habib-ur Rahman.

Netaji and his delegation also visited Fukuoka and Nagasaki in Japan. Kiani writes: 'On leaving Nagasaki, little did we realize that in less than a year's time, this beautiful and peaceful coastal city dotted with wooded hills would be broiling and scorching from the deadly radiation of the second atomic bomb to be dropped by the United States on Japan.'

On the return journey, Netaji visited Shanghai briefly and then travelled to



Saigon. There, during a meeting with Marshal Terauchi, the commander of the Japanese forces in the region, Netaji announced that he was promoting four INA officers, including M. Z. Kiani, to the rank of Major General. Kiani was just thirty-four. Terauchi looked at Kiani and said to Netaji: 'But Excellency, isn't Kiani *kakka* [honourable Kiani] too young?' Kiani blurted out: 'Your Excellency, Alexander the Great was only thirty-three when he died.' The room erupted in laughter.

In late April of 1945, Netaji undertook a perilous withdrawal from Rangoon to Bangkok, amidst constant aerial attack and the approach of British land forces. He was accompanied by some of his senior civilian colleagues and INA officers, and several hundred armed soldiers of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, the INA's now legendary women's unit. Netaji's top priority was the safe evacuation of the women soldiers from Burma, so they could return in due course to their families in Malaya and Thailand. The whole group was escorted by 300 battle-hardened veterans of the First Division. Netaji put Mohammad Zaman Kiani in charge of the withdrawal operation and declared that everyone, including himself, would have to abide by Kiani's directives during the withdrawal. The withdrawal to Bangkok was completed successfully. Netaji walked on foot alongside the INA's men and women for most of the journey, in tough terrain which involved risky river crossings. [*That story is recounted in detail in 'The Rani of Jhansi Regiment' article in this book. Ed.*]

During deliberations in Singapore in August 1945 on the next course of action as the war in Asia came to an end, Kiani felt that Netaji should perhaps lead the INA surrender in Singapore, where the Indian National Army had been born three and a half years earlier. But Netaji felt differently; his surrendering to the enemy was out of the question. On 16 August 1945, Netaji issued a brief order on the letterhead of the *Arzi Hukumat-e Azad Hind*, the Provisional Government of Free India proclaimed in Singapore on 21 October 1943. It read: 'During my absence from Syonan [Singapore], Major General M. Z. Kiani will represent the Provisional Government of Azad Hind.'

On 25 August 1945, the British landed in Singapore – the site of their historic debacle in February 1942 – and Mohammad Zaman Kiani became a prisoner of war. He was kept in Singapore's Pearl's Hill prison in deliberately degrading conditions. He was stripped of his INA uniform, given a loincloth to wear, and was given hardly any food for several weeks. But even then, whenever an Indian warder was on duty, extra food and a supply of cigarettes were smuggled to Kiani during the night. Kiani writes that the food was vegetarian: 'I could not get meat because my friends were Brahmins from Gorakhpur and non-meat eaters.'

After a couple of weeks, Mountbatten turned up at the jail to inspect the INA prisoners. Kiani and the others were lined up in their loincloths for the inspection, their



hands raised above their heads, and the inspection was filmed for posterity: 'In my mind, I pictured the great Lord standing in my position if he had lost the war.' Kiani has described the experience, which was filmed, as 'repulsive'.

In mid-December 1945, M. Z. Kiani and two other INA officers, Col. Inayat J. Kiani and Lt. Col. A. I. S. Dara, were flown to Delhi. They were at first kept in cage-like barbed-wire enclosures constructed for INA prisoners at the Red Fort, but still 'the reunion [with other comrades] was joyful and exciting'.

By this time, India was in the throes of a mass uprising in support of the three INA officers – Shah Nawaz Khan, Prem Kumar Sahgal and Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon – who had been put on trial by the British at the Red Fort. Kiani and other officers were then moved to a detention centre in the Delhi cantonment. There they had frequent visits from Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Nehru and Sarojini Naidu. Kiani was particularly impressed by Sarojini Naidu, whom he describes as 'that jewel of a lady': she 'always listened to our accounts of fighting and the struggle we had put up with great interest' and 'the hardships we had suffered moved her greatly, bringing tears to her eyes'. Gandhiji liked to banter with Inayat Kiani, the Gandhi Brigade's commander. He 'showed mock displeasure at his creed of non-violence having been disregarded, yet one could detect he felt flattered that a fighting formation had been named after him'. M. Z. Kiani felt gratified when Mahatma Gandhi placed his hand on his shoulder and said: '*Aap to hamare afsar hai.*' (You are our officer.)

But the words he treasured most throughout his life had come from his leader, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. On leaving Rangoon in late April of 1945, Netaji had said: 'I am leaving Burma with my mission unfulfilled, and it is the greatest disappointment of my life. But if I had ten men like Kiani with me, India would have been freed.'

## Notes

*Mohammad Zaman Kiani, who was from Rawalpindi, lived and worked in Pakistan after the partition of India, until his death at the age of seventy in June 1981. In 1980, he got in touch with Dr Sisir Kumar Bose in Calcutta, initially through the good offices of their common friend Fujiwara Iwaichi, who was instrumental in the formation of the INA in Singapore in 1942 (Fujiwara retired from the post-war Japan Self-Defence Forces with the rank of Lieutenant General in the mid-1960s).*

*On 30 July 1980, M. Z. Kiani wrote to Sisir Bose from Rawalpindi: 'You all have often been in my thoughts, but circumstances were such that we could not maintain contact. My effort recently to put down on paper my reminiscences has now offered me an*



*opportunity to get in touch with you. Our very good mutual friend General Fujiwara has informed me that you have received my manuscript "India's Freedom and the Great INA Movement". If you find the manuscript suitable, I will appreciate if you kindly have it published in India.'*

*Netaji Research Bureau facilitated the publication of General Kiani's memoir, India's Freedom Struggle and the Great INA, by Reliance Publishing House, New Delhi, in 1994. The book's second edition was published in 2018. The book is now also available in a Bengali edition.*

*On Netaji's ninetieth birth anniversary, 23 January 1987, Netaji Research Bureau posthumously honoured Major General Mohammad Zaman Kiani with its Netaji Award. General Kiani's widow, Begum Nasira Kiani, and his daughter, Zahida Kiani-Ahsanuddin, accepted the Award at Netaji Bhawan, Calcutta from Giani Zail Singh, the President of India. Zahida and her husband Farid Ahsanuddin, who live in Lahore, stayed in constant contact with Krishna Bose until she passed away on 22 February 2020, and they remain in touch with the NRB. Ed.*



## CYRIL JOHN TRACEY

I first saw Colonel Cyril John Tracey of the Indian National Army on 22 January 1946, in Calcutta. I had turned fifteen four weeks earlier. Like countless other teenagers and young people, I was fascinated and inspired by the saga of the INA, which had been suppressed and distorted by British propaganda during the war and had only just come to light. India was in the throes of a mass uprising in support of Netaji's soldiers and in solidarity with the three officers the imperialists had put on trial at the Red Fort: Shah Nawaz Khan, Prem Kumar Sahgal and Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon. Huge, rapturous crowds feted the INA officers, newly returned from Southeast Asia, wherever they went. Lakshmi Swaminathan, the Rani of Jhansi Regiment's charismatic commander, became an icon for girls of my age.

It was at one such public felicitation in Calcutta that I saw and listened to three INA heroes: Colonel Shaukat Malik, who raised the national tricolour at Moirang in Manipur's Imphal valley in April 1944, Colonel Habib-ur Rahman, who accompanied Netaji on his last journey which ended in tragedy in Taipei in August 1945, and Colonel Cyril John Tracey. In October 1945, I had started to keep a diary to record the tumultuous events unfolding in Bengal and India in the aftermath of the war and the eve of independence and the partition. The meeting where I saw Colonels Tracey, Rahman and Malik on 22 January 1946 – the day before Netaji's forty-ninth birthday, which was observed with huge emotion and pride everywhere in the sub-continent – is recorded in that diary.

The Azad Hind Fauj was truly national not just in its ethos but its composition. It had Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians fighting shoulder to shoulder in a common cause, and members from every part of the subcontinent.

But Cyril John Tracey still stood out because he was Anglo-Indian, from a community that not only stayed aloof from the independence movement but was by and large staunchly loyal to the Raj. Two of Tracey's ancestors apparently came to India from Ireland (Cork, in the south) in the late eighteenth century, when the East India Company was establishing its rule over India. They married Portuguese-speaking Indian women and the family line was born.

Tracey's father Daniel worked as a forest officer in south India. Cyril John was born in 1915 in Kurnool, in present-day Andhra Pradesh, and schooled at St Joseph's College, Bangalore. He was one of seven children – four sons and three daughters – born to Daniel and Ethel Tracey (four other children died in infancy). Daniel was Catholic and Ethel a Protestant. Tracey graduated from the Indian Military Academy at Dehradun – established in the early 1930s to train Indian



officer-recruits to the British-Indian Army – and was commissioned in 1938 as a lieutenant in the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment. A number of prominent INA officers were veterans of this battalion – including Mohammad Zaman Kiani, Shah Nawaz Khan and Habib-ur Rahman, as well as Mohan Singh, who was the first leader of the INA when it was formed in Singapore in 1942. Another fellow officer of Lieutenant Stracey's in the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was Captain Ayub Khan, who was to become the commander-in-chief of the Pakistan Army and then rule Pakistan as its military dictator from 1958 to 1969.

I next met Colonel Stracey more than four decades later, in November 1988, at his home in Coonoor, the picturesque little town in the Nilgiri mountains of south India where he had retired after a distinguished career in the Indian Foreign Service which lasted from 1948 to 1973. My youngest child, Sumantra, had left to begin his undergraduate studies in the United States at the end of August 1988. Alone at home in Calcutta without any of our children for the first time, Sisir and I decided, in October, to take a vacation in Ooty (Ootacamund/Udhagamandalam), the resort in the Nilgiris. Whilst there, we travelled to Coonoor for a few days, partly to meet Colonel Stracey, but also for another reason.



Krishna Bose boarding the Nilgiris' Blue Mountain Railway en route to meet Colonel Stracey of the INA in Coonoor, 1988. Photograph by Dr Sisir K. Bose.

My father-in-law, Sisir's father Sarat Chandra Bose, was imprisoned in Coonoor for almost three years during World War II. Sarat Bose was taken away from his home in Calcutta on 12 December 1941 and released only in September 1945. After being lodged in Calcutta's Presidency Jail for a few days, the British government decided to shift him far away from Bengal. He was taken by train to Trichy (then known as Trichinopoly, now Tiruchirappalli) in the deep south, where he was put in



solitary confinement in the Central Jail. After some time, he was moved to Mercara (now Madikeri) in Coorg and kept in a ramshackle bungalow converted into a detention centre.

Sarat Bose was then moved again to Coonoor, where he was imprisoned in a bungalow called Fairlight for almost three years, until his release in September 1945. In January or February of 1944, Sisir and his mother Bivabati visited Sarat Bose in Coonoor, at the heavily guarded Fairlight bungalow. A police officer, who was a Bengali, sat in on the brief meeting throughout, watching and listening intently. It was in Coonoor on 25 August 1945, during his last weeks in detention, that Sarat Bose read the news of his beloved younger brother Subhas's air crash in Taipei a week earlier (18 August) from headlines in the *Indian Express* and *Hindu* newspapers.

Sisir was naturally keen to see Fairlight again after nearly forty-five years, and I was very curious too. We were happy to find the bungalow in fine shape, covered with carefully tended creepers, its garden blooming with flowers. When Sarat Bose was there, Sisir recalled, the bungalow was fenced off with barbed wire. A British family then lived in the bungalow opposite. When Sarat took walks in the garden, the family's little boy would get excited and shout: 'Look, look, the prisoner has come out!'



The Fairlight bungalow in Coonoor where Sarat Chandra Bose was interned during World War II. Photograph by Krishna Bose (1988).

The two of us sat for a while on the bungalow's verandah. Sarat Chandra Bose wrote in his diary on Saturday, 25 August 1945: 'Today's "Indian Express" and "Hindu" brought the heart-rending news of Subhas's death ... Four or five nights back [I] dreamt that Subhas had come to see me. He was standing on the verandah of this bungalow and appeared to have become very tall in stature. I jumped up to see his face. Almost immediately thereafter, he disappeared. I did not attach any



meaning to the dream then and that is why I did not record it in this diary the day after. But, now?’

Our next stop was ‘Charleston’, Colonel Stracey’s bungalow. We found that he had organized an elaborate ‘high tea’ for us. We were a bit embarrassed that he, an elderly bachelor, had gone to so much trouble for our visit. He assured us that the huge array of food had been mostly prepared and brought by his neighbours – except the centrepiece, a giant cake he had baked himself. Indeed, the bungalow was flooded with people – neighbours and friends he had invited for the occasion. I could see he was a former ambassador. He stood in the centre of the room and made a welcome speech in the style of a diplomatic reception. After a while, I started to feel slightly irritated by the milling crowd and the endless taking of photographs. This was my opportunity to speak to Colonel Stracey in private about his experiences in the INA, and I did not want to lose it. Once the crowd dissipated, we pulled up two chairs and that conversation began.

The first thing Colonel Stracey said was that he had not been anyone that important in the INA. He reminded me that he had not fought on the front, either in India’s northeast in 1944 or in Burma in 1945. The modest disclaimer notwithstanding, the truth is that Cyril John Stracey held and discharged a very important role from his base in the INA’s Singapore headquarters after Netaji arrived in Southeast Asia and took command of the INA. He was the Indian National Army’s adjutant-general (AG) and quartermaster-general (QMG), with overall responsibility for the provision of weaponry and supplies to all INA units, including the forces fighting on the frontlines.





Colonel Cyril John Stracey, INA, who designed and built the INA Martyrs' Memorial in Singapore in 1945. Photographed in his home in Coonoor by Krishna Bose in 1988. Col. Stracey passed away a few days later.

On 8–9 December 1941, the Japanese thrust into the Malayan peninsula from the northwest and the northeast. Stracey was captured in northwest Malaya on 16 December after British defences around the town of Jitra, close to the Thai border,



were routed by the advancing Japanese. His battalion's commanding officer, Lt. Col. Fitzpatrick, was severely wounded and also captured. When Stracey was being taken some days later with other prisoners of war through the small city of Alor Setar, just south of Jitra, he noticed something strange. The tricolour flag of the Indian National Congress with the distinctive *charkha* emblem in the centre was flying on the erstwhile barracks of the British-Indian forces. Captain Mohan Singh, who had been taken prisoner on 15 December, emerged from one of those barracks and spoke briefly to him, telling him that there was something important to discuss, but later, at an opportune time.

Because of Stracey's fair complexion and looks, the Japanese thought he was white and for some weeks he was kept in POW detention along with captured British personnel in Kuala Lumpur. When the Japanese eventually figured out his Anglo-Indian identity, he was brought from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore, which had fallen to the Japanese in mid-February 1942.

In Singapore, he met first with a Major Rana, who had joined the INA from the British-Indian army's Bahawalpur Regiment. Over breakfast, Rana proposed that Stracey too join the INA. Stracey learned that most of his Indian fellow officers – M. Z. Kiani, Shah Nawaz Khan, Habib-ur Rahman, G. S. Dhillon and many others – had joined the INA. He readily agreed. He was then taken to the INA headquarters at the Bidadari camp to meet with Mohan Singh. As head of the INA, Mohan Singh now held the rank of General, but Stracey gladly joined at his old rank of Second Lieutenant.

After the initial surge of enthusiasm, the 'first' INA led by Mohan Singh floundered and became moribund by late 1942. It was revived with a vengeance from mid-1943, when Subhas Chandra Bose arrived in Singapore after his epic three-month submarine voyage from Europe, took command of the INA and assumed the leadership of the Azad Hind movement in Southeast Asia. It was in that 'second' INA under Netaji that Colonel Stracey served with loyalty and distinction until August 1945.

Colonel Stracey was very self-effacing about his role in Netaji's liberation army. He said to me shyly: 'Well, Netaji did assign me tasks from time to time; he knew he could rely on me.' In Singapore, Stracey became a mentor to the Tokyo Cadets, a group of forty-five boys in their middle to late teens whom Netaji sent on to Japan in 1944 to be trained as pilots for an Indian air force. Stracey was like an affectionate older brother to these boys, who had left their families to join the liberation struggle, and regularly played football with them. The most prominent of the erstwhile Tokyo Cadets is Ramesh Sakharam Benegal, an uncle of the famed movie director Shyam Benegal. Born in Rangoon in 1926, R. S. Benegal joined the Indian



Air Force in 1952 and served with distinction in the 1965 and 1971 wars. For his gallantry during the struggle to liberate Bangladesh in 1971, he was awarded the Mahavir Chakra (MVC), India's second-highest military decoration, and he also received the Ati Vishisht Seva Medal (AVSM) for his services.

Once, Stracey told me, he organized an INA inter-regimental football tournament in Singapore. It was a grand success, and Netaji inaugurated the tournament by doing the first match's kick-off. On another occasion, he organized a 'military tattoo' event that Netaji greatly enjoyed.

Just how much Netaji felt he could rely on Cyril John Stracey became apparent in July 1945. Netaji, now back in Singapore from Rangoon via Bangkok, summoned him and asked him to build a monument to the INA's martyred soldiers on Singapore's sea front. Netaji laid the monument's foundation stone on Singapore's Esplanade, in front of the imposing municipal hall building (which still stands), on 8 July 1945. Stracey got to work on the design of the monument.

On 6 August, the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and three days later, 9 August, on Nagasaki. Until that point, the war in Asia was expected to drag on. In Singapore, Mohammad Zaman Kiani has written in his memoirs, the Japanese had made extensive preparations to fiercely oppose a British landing when it came. They had prepared a fleet of boats rigged with explosives to ram British landing craft in kamikaze style. They had also dug a network of underground tunnels across the city and intended to fight street by street, in the manner of Stalingrad.

Everything changed abruptly after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It became clear that Japan's surrender was imminent in a matter of days. From 12 August onwards, Netaji held almost non-stop discussions on the south-facing verandah of his Singapore residence on Meyer Road with his top civilian and military colleagues on the next course of action of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind, which had been proclaimed in Singapore on 21 October 1943.

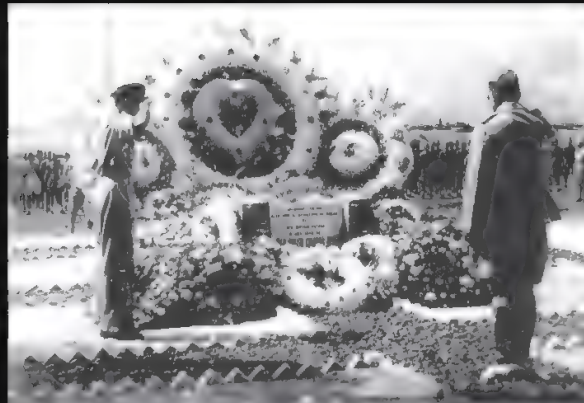
The deliberations concluded at sunrise on 16 August 1945. How the INA and the Indian Independence League should respond to the end of the war and the British re-occupation of Singapore and Malaya was extensively debated. The INA's Third Division was stationed at various places on the Malayan peninsula, and in Singapore itself there was a sizeable force of well-armed INA troops under the direct authority of the Supreme Command. The IIL, which had effectively become the INA's civilian counterpart, was of course entrenched across the countries of Southeast Asia, with numerous branches.

Then there was the urgent question of what Netaji himself should do – surrender in Singapore (which he ruled out), go underground, or try to reach a third country?



Early on in these confabulations, Colonel Stracey walked in, carrying a number of paper designs and miniature models of the memorial. Netaji looked through them and selected one. He told Stracey that time was now very short and enquired if he would be able to complete the construction of the memorial. 'Certainly, sir,' Stracey replied, saluted smartly and went off. Stracey recalled to me in Coonoor that some of the others looked sceptical, and they were not to blame for doubting that he would be able to find the materials and the workers to complete the task.

A marble monument of simple but elegant design, twenty-five feet tall, came up on Singapore's sea front about a week later. It consisted of three thick pillars, the middle pillar slightly higher than the other two. The INA motto was inscribed near the top ends of the pillars: *Itmad* (Faith) on the middle pillar, *Ittefaq* (Unity) on the left pillar and *Qurbani* (Sacrifice) on the right pillar.



Netaji lays the foundation stone of the INA Martyrs' Memorial on Singapore's sea front, 8 July 1945.





A close-up of the foundation stone of the INA Martyrs' Memorial, Singapore

Major General Mohammad Zaman Kiani, whom Netaji left in charge in Singapore when he left on 16 August, writes in his memoir that 'every effort was made to complete it before he left, but this could not be done'. He goes on: 'Unfortunately, when completed, its opening ceremony performed by me had to coincide with the



mourning ceremony of the most tragic death of the supreme leader, who lost his life in a plane crash at Taipei in Formosa [Taiwan] on 18 August 1945. It was a very poignant moment and I have to admit, though without shame, that almost all those attending the ceremony broke down when eulogies to Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose were being offered.'

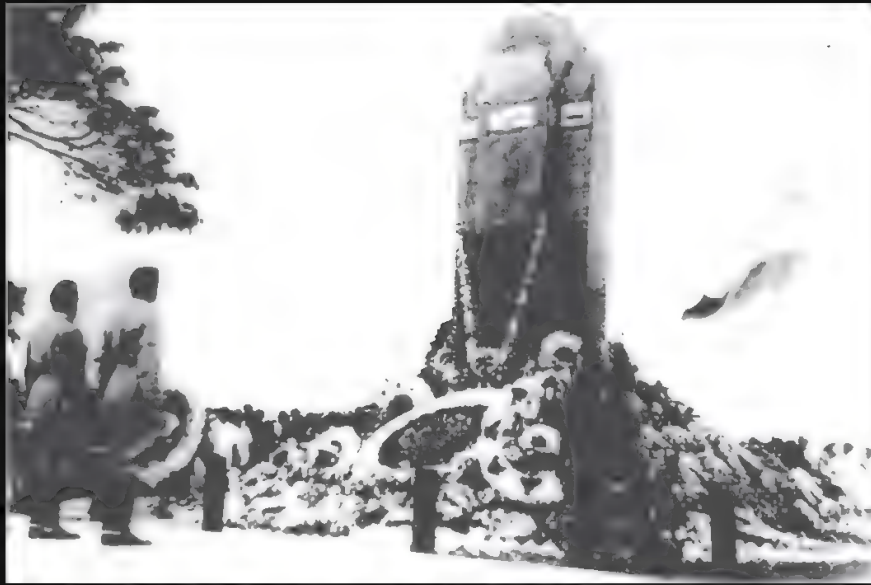
The photograph of the occasion shows M. Z. Kiani, a big wreath in his right hand, leading INA officers in saluting the monument. A large number of civilians are also present. The monument is adorned with a massive garland, and there are dozens of floral wreaths around its base. Beside the monument, the saffron-white-green tri-colour with the *charkha* in the centre flutters in the breeze.





The completed INA Martyrs' Memorial in Singapore, August 1945. It was inaugurated a few days after Netaji's death on 18 August 1945.





The inauguration ceremony of the INA Martyrs' Memorial in Singapore, August 1945. Major General Mohammad Zaman Kiani with his back to camera, second from left. The national tricolour is flying at half-mast in honour of Netaji's martyrdom.

The British forces landed in Singapore on 25 August 1945 and established a beachhead at the harbour. On 6 September, Colonel Stracey was detained and taken to Singapore's Pearl's Hill jail. The British officer who came to take him did not know the way to the prison. They got into Stracey's INA staff car and the man drove while Stracey gave directions. A wave of detentions of INA officers occurred around this time. Mohammad Zaman Kiani was detained on 5 September and taken to the Pearl's Hill jail. He and a few other officers, including Colonel Inayat Kiani and Lt. Col. M. Ashraf, had just cooked and eaten the last duck in their possession for lunch and were playing cards when an Australian officer called. It 'was to be my last proper meal for several months', Kiani has written in his memoirs.

At 6 p.m. on 6 September 1945, the day Stracey entered the Pearl's Hill jail, the INA martyrs' monument was dynamited to rubble by the British on the order of their commander-in-chief, Lord Louis Mountbatten. A group of Indian soldiers of the 17th Dogra Regiment placed the charges at the base of the monument and a British major checked the fuses before they were lit. A brigadier wearing a Scottish kilt – probably Patrick McKerron, who would be Singapore's colonial administrator from 1946 to 1950 – then inspected a guard of honour by the Dogra detachment and made a speech.

Sometime after India's independence, Stracey told me in Coonoor, Prime Minister Nehru personally presented him with a fragment of the demolished memorial. The fragment had 'SUBASH CH' on it. Nehru had been given the fragment by a Singaporean Indian. Singaporean Indians had quietly come to the memorial site during the night and collected fragments. I told Stracey that one such fragment was



in the possession of the Netaji Research Bureau in Calcutta as well.

Major General Kiani has recorded in his memoir – in an understated and matter-of-fact tone – the severe indignities and brutal treatment he was subjected to in the Pearl's Hill prison for the next three months, and especially the first few weeks. About two weeks into his detention, Mountbatten turned up at the jail and Kiani was made to line up with other prisoners to be inspected by him, wearing only a loin-cloth and with his hands raised above his head.

Colonel Stracey did not speak to me about his experience in the Pearl's Hill jail. But I knew from other INA officers that he was singled out for particular brutality, because of his Anglo-Indian identity. His captors repeatedly pressured him to say that he had been coerced to join the INA, and to denounce the Azad Hind movement. C. J. Stracey refused to oblige.

M. Z. Kiani, along with Lt. Col. A. I. S. Dara and Colonel Inayat Jan Kiani – who led the INA's Gandhi Brigade in Manipur during the 1944 Imphal campaign – were flown from Singapore to the Red Fort in Delhi in mid-December 1945. There, they joined thousands of other INA prisoners in specially constructed barbed-wire cages. Around the same time, Stracey too was brought to the Red Fort.

As he recalled those days, he turned to Sisir and asked: 'Were you at the Red Fort too?' Sisir told him that he was held in solitary confinement for three and a half months in the notorious Lahore Fort, followed by seven and a half months in the Lyallpur (present-day Faisalabad) prison, also in the Punjab. But while in transit from Calcutta to the Punjab, Sisir had spent about ten days in a dungeon cell at the Red Fort in October 1944.

Colonel Stracey guffawed and said: 'Ha ha, so we have both been guests of Shah Jahan. Well, they didn't put me in an underground cell. I was put up in the Mughal horse stables.' I told him that I had seen and listened to him in Calcutta on 22 January 1946, shortly after his release from the Red Fort. He told me that when he visited Calcutta, two of his brothers were there. Ralph, an officer in the Indian Civil Service (ICS), lived on Elgin Road, where Netaji Bhawan is situated. Another brother, Eric, a high-ranking police officer, was also based in Calcutta and was ordered to keep a close watch on Cyril.

In 1946–1947, Stracey worked with dedication as the joint secretary of the INA Advisory Committee, set up by senior INA officers for the relief and rehabilitation of the tens of thousands of INA personnel who had returned to the subcontinent. Under British influence and pressure – particularly Mountbatten's – none were taken back into the Indian Army (and subsequently the Pakistan Army as well) and had to find alternative means of livelihood.

A number of INA officers – among them Major Abid Hasan, Lt. Col. Mahboob



Ahmed, and Col. Cyril John Stracey – were however inducted into the Indian Foreign Service. Stracey commenced his career as a diplomat in 1948. He had possibly the longest and most distinguished diplomatic career of the ex-INA officers. He was second secretary in Bonn, first secretary in Washington, DC, consul-general in San Francisco, charge d'affaires in Paris, and charge d'affaires at The Hague. He also had postings in Karachi and Jakarta. In 1965, he became India's ambassador to Madagascar, where he was posted until 1968, and then became ambassador to Finland (Helsinki) until his retirement in 1973.

When Sisir and I took leave of Colonel Stracey in Coonoor, we requested him to come to Calcutta and be a guest of honour at the Netaji Research Bureau's commemoration of Netaji's ninety-second birth anniversary on 23 January 1989 (1989 was also the birth centenary year of Sarat Chandra Bose). Stracey said he was suffering from a heart ailment and had medical advice not to travel. I said, 'Fine, in that case we will come to see you.' He was visibly moved, clasped my hand tightly and said: 'Please do come. You know you are most welcome.'

On 10 November 1988, Sisir and I boarded a train of the legendary Blue Mountain Railway – built by Swiss engineers at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – and came down from Coonoor to Mettupalayam at the base of the Nilgiris.

A couple of days later, we were in our hotel in Madras (now Chennai), when a good friend, Captain Dasan, called on us. Dasan had been a Tokyo Cadet, one of the teenaged boys Stracey had mentored and played football with in Singapore. In independent India, he had joined Air India and been one of its seniormost pilots for many years until his recent retirement.

Captain Dasan walked in with an uncharacteristically downcast face and said: 'Have you heard? Colonel Stracey is no more!'

We were in disbelief. Dasan rang the hotel reception and asked them to send up the previous day's *Indian Express* and *Hindu* newspapers. They had the news, in small print on inside pages, of the death in Coonoor of Cyril John Stracey, former diplomat and ambassador. There was no mention that he had been part of the climactic struggle for India's freedom as a soldier of the Indian National Army.

Just as Sisir and I were travelling down from Coonoor to Mettupalayam on the Blue Mountain Railway, Cyril John Stracey's life had ebbed from him after a heart attack.

## Notes

*There is a story that when the INA martyrs' monument was being dynamited in Singapore on 6 September 1945, a group of surrendered rank-and-file INA soldiers were squatting nearby in a huddle. They became agitated when they realized what was*



*happening, and one of them loudly cursed Mountbatten by name, saying that one day he would meet the same fate as the memorial.*

*In August 1979, Mountbatten was as usual holidaying in his summer retreat, a castle on the northwestern coast of the Republic of Ireland close to the border with Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland was then a zone of armed conflict between the British and pro-British elements and Irish nationalists waging an insurgency for the end of British control and the reunification of Ireland. On 27 August 1979, Mountbatten was blown to bits by a bomb planted on his boat by members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (P-IRA).*

*Three months later, in November 1979, Gerry Adams, then a rising star of the resistance movement in Northern Ireland, and later in the 1990s and beyond a key player in the Northern Ireland peace process and settlement, commented: 'The IRA gave clear reasons for his execution. I think it is unfortunate that anyone has to be killed but ... what the IRA did to him is what Mountbatten had been doing all his life to other people. With his war record, I don't think he could have objected to dying in what is clearly a war situation. He knew the danger involved in coming to this country [Ireland].'*

*In 1995, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, the Singapore Government erected a simple but elegant 'INA Marker' at the exact spot of the memorial demolished on 6 September 1945, with generous donations from Singaporeans of Indian origin. It has since become a site of pilgrimage and homage for Indians visiting Singapore.*

*Replicas of the INA Martyrs' Monument created by Cyril John Stracey stand in numerous places across India. One stands outside the ramparts of the Red Fort in Delhi, next to a statue of Netaji. Another stands at the Maidan in the centre of Calcutta (now Kolkata), also next to a statue of Netaji. Yet others stand in the town of Moirang in Manipur's Imphal valley, where Shaukat Malik raised the flag of Free India in April 1944, and in the historic driveway of Netaji Bhawan in Kolkata at 38/2 Lala Lajpat Rai Sarani (formerly Elgin Road). The replica of the memorial in Netaji Bhawan's driveway is now flanked by bronze busts of Dr Sisir Bose (1920–2000) and Prof (Mrs) Krishna Bose (1930–2020), the builders of the Netaji Research Bureau at Netaji Bhawan. Ed.*



## MIAN AKBAR SHAH

When people think of Netaji's close associates and comrades in struggle, Mian Akbar Shah is not a name that immediately comes to mind. Yet, this Pathan from the North-West Frontier Province played a crucial role in Netaji's great escape from India, which began from Calcutta on 16–17 January 1941 and culminated in his arrival in Berlin – disguised as an Italian, with the fictitious identity of Orlando Mazzotta – at the beginning of April 1941.

Akbar Shah was born in 1898 in a village called Badrashi in the Nowshera *tehsil* (subdivision) of the Frontier Province's Peshawar district. He had political inclinations from his youth. In 1920, he travelled through Afghanistan to the Soviet Union. This brought him to the attention of the British authorities. He was arrested on his return, and briefly jailed. Around 1930, he qualified as a lawyer. In 1933, he joined the Indian National Congress and became a well-known Congress activist of the Peshawar region.





Mian Akbar Shah, who received Netaji in Peshawar in January 1941 during his escape from India. Akbar Shah arranged Netaji's shelter in Peshawar at the house of Abad Khan and his onward journey to Kabul.

Akbar Shah became close to Subhas Chandra Bose after Bose resigned from his second democratically elected term as Congress president in end-April 1939, following his rift with Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress high command. Shah was one of the legions of progressive, left-leaning Congress activists across the subcontinent who supported Bose and joined the Forward Bloc, the platform Bose floated to advance his agenda of anti-imperialist struggle and his leftist ideological outlook. Shah became the Forward Bloc's main organizer in the Frontier Province. Between mid-1939 and mid-1940 – when he was again arrested in Calcutta and cast into



prison – Netaji toured India extensively to motivate and mobilize his supporters.

Akbar Shah joined his leader on tours in central and southern India. Youth and especially students rallied to Bose all over India. Netaji was himself stunned by the scale and warmth of the welcome he received in some cities, such as Lahore in the Punjab. In Peshawar, Akbar Shah organized two huge rallies where Netaji spoke, one in Peshawar city and another in the cantonment area. The British initially banned the cantonment meeting but lifted the ban at the last minute when they realized that trying to prevent it would cause more problems. Congress workers and members of the *Khudai Khidmatgar* movement led by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan attended the Peshawar rallies in massive numbers. Netaji was very impressed and has recorded in writing that he attributed the success of the Peshawar rallies to the organizational abilities of Mian Akbar Shah, his chief representative in the Frontier Province.

In the first week of December 1940, the British government reluctantly released Netaji from five months of incarceration in Calcutta's Presidency Jail after he went on hunger strike. Weak from the fast unto death, he was brought by ambulance from the prison to the Bose family's mansion at 38/2 Elgin Road. The police kept a close watch on him and John Herbert, the governor of Bengal, assured Viceroy Linlithgow in Delhi – who did not like Bose's release – that a 'cat-and-mouse game' was being played with Subhas Bose and he would be arrested and imprisoned again as soon as possible.

Some time in the second week of December, Akbar Shah received a telegram from Calcutta at Badrashi, his village. It read: 'REACH CALCUTTA-BOSE'. Shah knew that Netaji would not summon him in this manner unless there was something urgent to discuss. He immediately got on the Frontier Mail from Peshawar and arrived in Calcutta after a journey that lasted three nights.

At the exit of Howrah station, Shah ran into a police officer he knew from previous visits, whose job was to keep tabs on Pathans residing in or visiting Calcutta. The man hugged him warmly and asked in a friendly way where Shah was going to stay while in Calcutta, so he could call on Shah for a chat later, once he was off duty. To fob the man off, Shah told him 'London Hotel' on the spur of the moment without knowing whether there was in fact any hotel of that name in the city, and quickly resumed walking. He took a taxi with the intention of going straight to the house on Elgin Road. On his earlier visits to Calcutta, Shah had either stayed at the house or Netaji had arranged for him to stay at the homes of friendly people. But once in the taxi, Shah changed his mind. It occurred to him that it would be safer and wiser to not go directly to Elgin Road, and asked the driver to take him to a hotel somewhere around the city centre. The driver took him to a small hotel on



Mirzapur Street (now Surya Sen Street, named in honour of the leader of the 1930 Chittagong insurrection against the British) in the College Square area, just north of the city's downtown hub. Shah decided to be extra cautious and not call on Netaji immediately but on the following day.

When Akbar Shah arrived at 38/2 Elgin Road the next day, he was received by Netaji's secretary, Amulya Mukherjee, and taken upstairs to Netaji's bedroom on the first floor. He found Netaji lying propped up in bed, looking weak. He also noticed that Netaji was unshaven and had a beard, and assumed that was because of the recent incarceration and the hunger strike. The first thing Netaji said to him was to apologize for being unable to rise to greet him properly, but that he was very pleased that Shah had come. Shah recalls that a young woman and a young man were in the room when he walked in, but they left immediately. Netaji asked his secretary to arrange for tea for Shah. Once the tea was served, the secretary too left and they started talking, Shah on a chair by Netaji's bed.

Netaji told Akbar Shah that he had gone on hunger strike because that was the only way of getting out of prison (He had in fact told the British government: 'Release me, or I will refuse to live.'). He had made up his mind to leave India and make contact with the leaders of countries opposed to British imperialism, including the Soviet Union, and seek their help in India's freedom struggle. He wished Akbar Shah to assist him to cross the northwest frontier of India and travel through the tribal territories to Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan.

When I heard this account from Mian Akbar Shah in England in 1983, I asked him if he was taken by surprise by what Netaji said. He replied that he actually wasn't. During their travels together in various parts of India during 1939 and especially 1940, Netaji would sometimes ask Akbar Shah questions about the tribal areas straddling the frontier between British India and Afghanistan, the routes into Afghanistan, and about Shah's own journey through Afghanistan to the Soviet Union in 1920.

Akbar Shah told Netaji that it would be no problem to arrange for him to cross the frontier, but how would he get to Peshawar? Netaji said that he was in the process of arranging the journey from Calcutta to Peshawar, and needed Shah to help him get from Peshawar to Kabul.

Shah then told Netaji he would personally escort him from Peshawar through the tribal territories and into Afghanistan to Kabul; Netaji would ride a horse and Shah would walk alongside. Netaji said no. He said Akbar Shah was too well known in those parts, including and especially to the British police and its network of spies. He told Shah that some other trustworthy person(s) should accompany him from Peshawar to Kabul. Shah felt a little deflated but he could see that Netaji had a



sound point.

Akbar Shah next told Netaji that he should be disguised as a Muslim. Netaji responded that he agreed; that was why he was keeping a beard, and he had a black sherwani he could wear as the outer garment (it was winter, of course). Shah told Netaji that in order to avoid the language problem in the Frontier Province and beyond – Netaji was by this time proficient in speaking in Hindustani but obviously did not know Pashto – he should pretend to be deaf and mute, and travelling to a religious shrine for divine benediction. If anyone spoke to him, he should simply touch his right hand to the forehead and then raise it upwards, which would convey that he was calling on God's mercy for his condition.

In the bedroom on Calcutta's Elgin Road, Akbar Shah demonstrated to Netaji how to pray in a mosque, how to hold shoes in his hand while entering a mosque, etc. He also suggested the pseudonym, 'Mohammad Ziauddin', which Netaji used as his fake identity when he escaped from Calcutta in disguise about a month later. [*Ziauddin's identity was of a travelling salesman of life insurance, with an address in Jubbulpore in central India. Ed.*] Finally, he asked if Netaji had the clothes he needed for his disguise for the journey from Calcutta to Peshawar. Netaji said he did not yet, but was planning to acquire those that day itself, and needed his assistance to do so.

As this remarkable conversation unfolded, a handsome but frail-looking young man of twenty entered the room. Netaji introduced him to Akbar Shah: 'This is Sisir Kumar, he is the son of my *mejdada* Saratbabu, whom you know well.' Netaji told Sisir – my future husband – that the visitor was going to leave for Peshawar by the night train from Howrah. He also said that he was sending his secretary directly to Howrah to buy Akbar Shah's ticket and ensure a berth for him on the train. Netaji asked Sisir to take Akbar Shah to the station in Sisir's car but on the way, Mr Shah would need to first pick up his belongings from the hotel on Mirzapur Street and then visit a store on Dharmatala Street in the city centre to make a few purchases. Sisir noticed a measuring tape was lying on his uncle's bed.

Sisir Bose and Akbar Shah got into the German-made Wanderer car in which Sisir was to drive his uncle to the Gomoh railway junction in Bihar (now in Jharkhand) on the first leg of Netaji's escape from India in mid-January 1941. On this occasion, Sisir and Akbar Shah got into the back and a chauffeur drove the car.

During the ride, speaking softly in English, Akbar Shah told Sisir that Netaji had told him that Sisir was assisting him with the escape from Calcutta and had asked for his help in Peshawar. They drove first to Mirzapur Street where Akbar Shah picked up his luggage, and then drove to the well-known Wachhel Molla department store on Dharmatala Street. There, Sisir showed Akbar Shah the counter for



men's clothing and loitered about while Shah bought two pairs of loose Pathan-style trousers and a black astrakhan-type cap for Netaji. Out of the corner of his eye, Sisir saw Akbar Shah checking the size of the trousers against his own body, as if he was buying for himself.

Sisir and Akbar Shah had agreed in the car that Shah would 'forget' the packet containing the items in the back seat of the Wanderer. When they reached Howrah, they found Mr Mukherjee, Netaji's secretary, waiting at the front entrance of the station with Mr Shah's ticket. Netaji had told Sisir to not alight and linger at the station but simply bid Shah a quick goodbye. Sisir did just that, except for passing Akbar Shah's luggage to a porter, and told the chauffeur to drive home. But an unexpected problem arose when the chauffeur spotted the packet lying on the back seat as they were driving out of the station premises. He offered to run and hand the packet to the departing guest! To dissuade him from doing so, Sisir pretended to be annoyed at the visitor's forgetfulness and told the chauffeur he was in a hurry to get home, and the packet would be sent on by parcel post. Back home at 1 Woodburn Park – Sarat Bose's house, two minutes' walk from 38/2 Elgin Road – Sisir safely placed the packet in the wardrobe of his own room.

It took Akbar Shah three nights to get back to Badrashi. The long journey in mid-December 1941 gave him plenty of time to think about the extraordinary task that had just been assigned to him.

There were two main issues. First, whom to ask to escort Netaji from Peshawar through the tribal areas into Afghanistan and to Kabul. *[These areas on Pakistan's border with Afghanistan, known as Pakistan's 'Federally Administered Tribal Areas' or FATA until 2018, were merged in that year into Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, as the North-West Frontier Province was renamed in 2010. Ed.]* Shah made a mental shortlist of three men. Mohammad Shah had good contacts in Afghanistan. Abad Khan knew the tribal territories very well. Then there was Bhagat Ram Talwar, a Hindu Pathan whose older brother Hari Kishan had been a friend of Akbar Shah's. Hari Kishan Talwar was hanged by the British in 1931 after trying to assassinate the British governor of the Punjab.

The other matter was where to keep Netaji in Peshawar before he commenced the onward journey to Afghanistan. Akbar Shah was quite concerned about this. Peshawar had a strong presence of the British police's CID (Criminal Investigation Department) and was crawling with their spies and informers. Akbar Shah had already told Netaji in Calcutta that he worried more about the stopover in Peshawar than the physically arduous journey through the tribal areas. Shah believed that once Netaji entered the tribal territories, he would be protected by the tribals' traditional code of honour, *Pakhtunwali*, which among other things mandates



hospitality to guests and support to those who seek refuge. Shah had told Netaji the story of Ajab Khan Afridi, who rebelled against the British in 1923 and then fled into the tribal areas. The British demanded that he be returned. The tribals not only refused, they escorted the rebel to Kabul where he settled after the Afghan government received him warmly and gave him some land.

The day after Akbar Shah's return to Badrashi, Mohammad Shah came to see him. Akbar Shah took him into confidence and Mohammad Shah gladly agreed to accompany Netaji from Peshawar to Kabul. A couple of days later, Mohammad Shah dropped by again, this time accompanied by Bhagat Ram Talwar, and a more detailed discussion about the journey took place. Bhagat Ram was quiet and did not say much; he mostly listened.

The next day, to Akbar Shah's surprise, Bhagat Ram appeared again in Badrashi, alone. This time, Bhagat Ram had come with a purpose. He kept insisting that he and not Mohammad Shah should be allowed to escort Netaji to Kabul. In Akbar Shah's words, 'I objected' because Mohammad Shah had already agreed to do so but 'Bhagat Ram appeared to be very excited' and was extremely insistent. He resorted almost to emotional blackmail and told Akbar Shah that otherwise he would never come to Badrashi again. After thinking things over, Akbar Shah decided to accede to Bhagat Ram. He persuaded Mohammad Shah with difficulty to step back and agree to be the reserve person in case something happened to or went wrong with Bhagat Ram. Mohammad Shah was not happy but reluctantly agreed, and Akbar Shah convinced him to continue to be involved with the planning and help out as necessary. Akbar Shah thought it was actually good that both Mohammad Shah and Bhagat Ram were keen to escort Netaji, because in such a risky endeavour it was advisable to have a back-up person.

From their discussion in Calcutta, Akbar Shah had got the impression that Netaji was planning to arrive in Peshawar on 16 January 1941. So on 16 January, he and the others waited at separate points at the Peshawar Cantonment station for the Frontier Mail to arrive. But Netaji did not appear. They were puzzled but surmised that his departure from Calcutta had been delayed for some reason or he had missed the Frontier Mail in Delhi. They waited again on 17 and 18 January, but he still did not appear.

It then struck Akbar Shah that he had misunderstood Netaji – in fact, Netaji had meant he would leave Calcutta on 16 January, in which case he would reach Peshawar on 19 January. This was correct. Netaji escaped from the Elgin Road house on the night of 16–17 January 1941, driven by Sisir, and Sisir dropped him just after midnight on 17–18 January at the Gomoh station [*now Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Gomoh Junction, ed.*] – forty kilometres beyond Dhanbad and 320 kilometres from



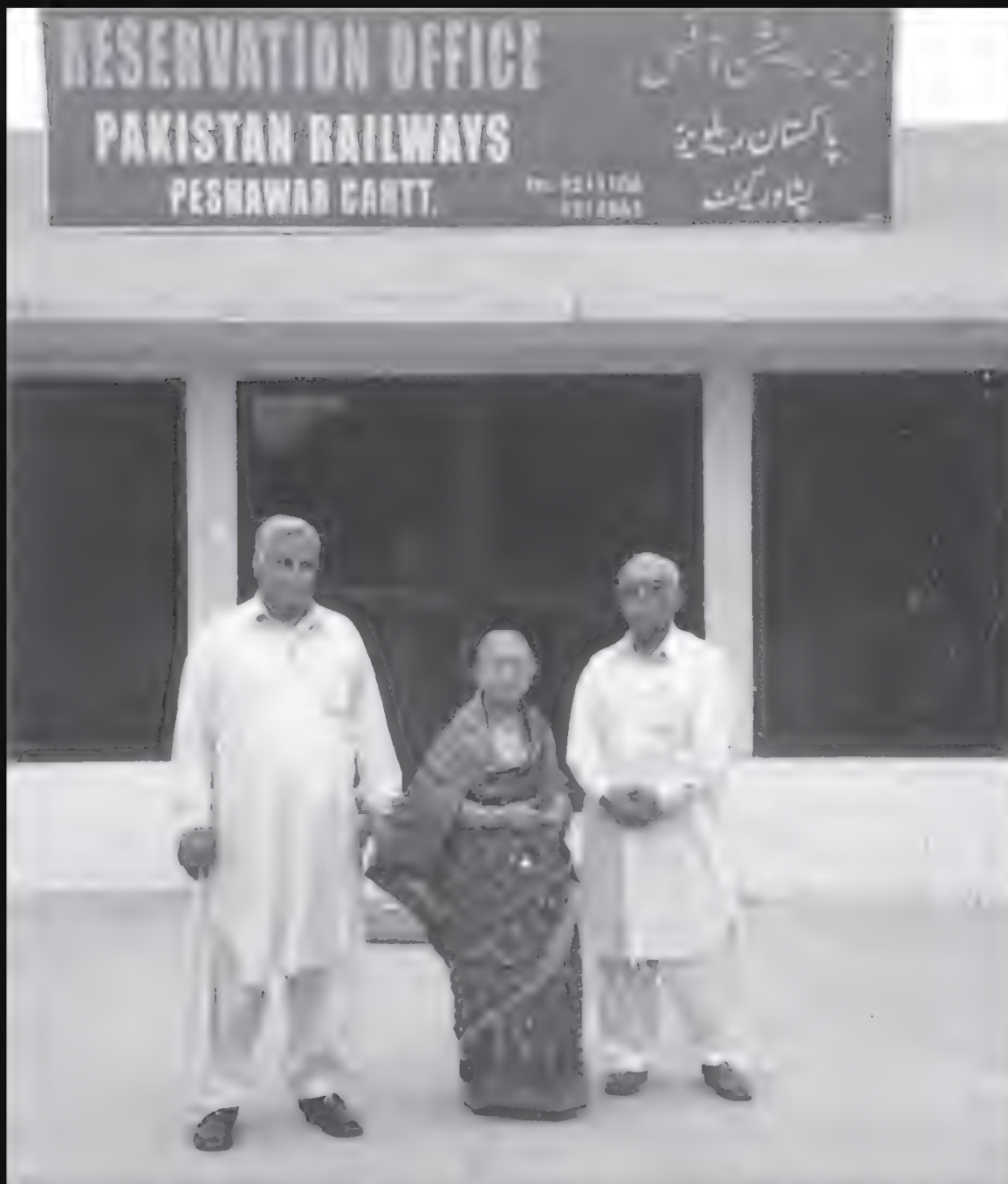
Calcutta – from where Netaji boarded the Delhi-Kalka Mail and then took the Frontier Mail from Delhi to Peshawar.

On the evening of 19 January 1941, the Frontier Mail arrived as usual. Akbar Shah was waiting close to the exit gate when he 'spotted a distinguished-looking Muslim gentleman wearing a long black coat'. It was Subhas Chandra Bose, in the disguise of Mohammad Ziauddin, a north Indian travelling salesman of life insurance policies. Netaji handed the waiting ticket collector his ticket and exited through the gate.

Akbar Shah moved close to him and, speaking in a low voice, guided him to a tonga. He told the tonga driver to take the passenger to Dean's Hotel, a very fancy hotel of the city. [*Dean's, built in 1913, had Kipling, Churchill, Jinnah, King Nadir Shah of Afghanistan and the historian Arnold Toynbee among its guests. It was demolished around the turn of this century and replaced by a shopping mall. Ed.*] Shah got into another tonga and followed Netaji's.

The driver of Akbar Shah's tonga was very unhappy that Shah was taking his guest to Dean's Hotel. He told Shah the guest looked like a learned, pious gentleman (*alim*) and Dean's Hotel was meant for infidels. Shah replied that unfortunately there was no Muslim hotel good enough for a gentleman of his standing. The tonga driver disagreed and told Shah that the Taj Mahal Hotel was a very good hotel. The driver continued babbling and asked Shah where the guest would find a *jai namaz* (prayer rug) and *wazu* (water for ablutions before prayers) in Dean's Hotel.





Krishna Bose in Peshawar, 2005. To her left is Mohammad Siraj Khan, son of Abad Khan, who sheltered Netaji in Peshawar during his escape from India in January 1941.

At this point, Akbar Shah suddenly felt that it would in fact be safer to take Netaji to somewhere more ordinary than to the city's top hotel (he had chosen Dean's for Netaji because of its high standards and level of comfort). He asked the driver to call the driver of Netaji's tonga back, and follow them to the Taj Mahal Hotel.

At the Taj Mahal Hotel, the bearded manager was at first dismissive and told Akbar Shah the hotel was full. But as soon as he saw Netaji in his distinguished-looking disguise, he stood up, greeted him respectfully and offered a room.

Shah recalls that the room was spacious and nicely carpeted. So impressed was the manager by Netaji's courtly appearance that he started attending personally to



him. He laid another carpet in the room, arranged a *jai namaz* rug, and ordered a waiter to put extra coal in the fireplace to keep the room warm [it was quite cold in Peshawar in January]. He also ordered the hotel's cook to prepare a sumptuous dinner for the guest.

Both the tonga drivers were happy that the guest had put up at the Taj Mahal. Once Akbar Shah was sure Netaji was comfortable, he departed from the hotel. Before leaving, he paid the manager the money for one night's stay in advance. The manager was reluctant to take it and told Shah he could pay later. Shah explained that he would come early in the morning to take the guest elsewhere so it was better to settle up. The manager then agreed and the waiter standing by was instructed about the early-morning departure. *[In 2005, Krishna Bose visited Peshawar during a trip to Pakistan. She visited the Peshawar Cantonment station and the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bajuri Gate. Her visit to Peshawar was extensively covered in the Pakistani media. Ed.]*

Akbar Shah had planned to put Netaji (Ziauddin) up for a few days at the house of a friend, till he set off for Kabul. This friend was well to do and had a comfortable house in the city. Shah was thinking of Netaji's creature comforts.

As Akbar Shah was walking towards the friend's house, he ran into Abad Khan at the Pussa Khwanī Bazar. Abad Khan was a trusted comrade of Shah's and a senior Forward Bloc activist of the Peshawar district, with a long political background. He was one of the three men Shah had mentally shortlisted to be Netaji's companion on the journey from Peshawar to Kabul. But he had not contacted Abad in the end after both Bhagat Ram and Mohammad Shah proved willing and eager to escort Netaji. Abad Khan was surprised to see Akbar Shah and asked where he was going at such a late hour. Shah then took him into confidence.

Abad Khan was very upset that Akbar Shah had not told him about something so important. He said that Mr Bose should not be kept either in a hotel or in someone else's house in disguise, but at his house. Shah demurred. He told Khan that he believed Netaji was used to a certain level of comfort, and Abad Khan's house was not suitable for that purpose. But Abad Khan was adamant. He argued that it would in fact be very useful for Netaji to experience how ordinary, poor Pathans lived and he would personally tutor Netaji in Pathan manners, habits and customs for the journey ahead. Akbar Shah eventually acceded to Abad Khan's entreaties.

The two men went to the Taj Mahal Hotel just before daybreak and brought Netaji to Abad Khan's humble home. As they entered, there were two charpoys. Netaji sat down on one of them and asked for a drink of water. Akbar Shah whispered to Abad Khan in Pashto to bring water in a clean glass tumbler. Abad Khan started laughing and Netaji asked them what the matter was. Abad Khan then told Netaji that from



now on he should drink water not from glass tumblers but from a *kandoli*, an earthen pot from which Pathans drink water. Abad Khan brought water in a *kandoli*, and both he and Akbar Shah started laughing helplessly as they watched Subhas Chandra Bose drinking from it. Abad Khan told Netaji that during his coming journey to Kabul, a tribesman might offer him the water left in his *kandoli* after drinking some of it. He must accept without hesitation and drink the water left over in the tribesman's *kandoli*.

Akbar Shah writes that 'that was the beginning of Netaji's practical training' in the ways of the Pathans. Netaji happily stayed in Abad Khan's home for six days, 20–25 January 1941.

According to Shah, 'Abad Khan and Netaji became very good friends. They would talk for hours together. Netaji learned the various customs and behaviours of Pathans. Netaji was trained [by Abad Khan] how to walk, how to respond to people's greetings [even as a deaf-mute], and how to eat from a common plate sharing the food with others. He was also instructed how to enter a mosque and say prayers in the tribal areas.' [*In 2005, Krishna Bose visited the house in the Jehangirpura locality of Peshawar where Netaji stayed with Abad Khan and his family in January 1941. Krishna Bose was accompanied during her time in Peshawar by Mohammad Siraj Khan, Abad Khan's son. Mohammad Siraj had earlier attended a birthday commemoration of Netaji in the 1980s at Netaji Bhawan in Kolkata. Born around 1939, he was an infant when Netaji stayed with them. Ed.*]

Apart from providing Netaji with a safe shelter and the 'training', Abad Khan wanted to take charge of Netaji's journey to Kabul. He told Akbar Shah there was no need to involve anyone else and that he would arrange a guide to take Mr Bose to Kabul. Akbar Shah knew that Abad Khan had excellent knowledge of and contacts in the tribal areas. But discussions had already been held with Mohammad Shah and Bhagat Ram, and Shah told him that. Besides, Shah told Khan, Netaji would have to be looked after once he arrived in Kabul and his escort would need to help him make contact with officials and embassies. A tribal guide would not be able to do that. Abad Khan reluctantly climbed down. During the six-day stay in Abad Khan's house, Mohammad Shah and Bhagat Ram visited the house once each, separately and on different days. Meanwhile, Akbar Shah procured some thick cloth of greyish colour and got a tailor to make a long shirt, a pair of baggy trousers and a turban for Netaji. When Netaji tried the outfit on, Shah recalls, he looked just like a Pathan tribesman.

Since 1931, the Indian National Congress had observed 26 January as Independence Day (the date which became India's Republic Day from 1950). On the morning of Sunday, 26 January 1941, clad in that Pathan outfit and with a folded blanket



slung over his shoulder, Subhas Chandra Bose left Abad Khan's house in Peshawar in a car arranged by Abad Khan. Netaji was accompanied by Mohammad Shah, Bhagat Ram, and a guide arranged by Abad Khan. Akbar Shah returned to his village, Badrashi, located about twenty-five miles from Peshawar city. [*Badrashi is now a town of about 50,000 in the Nowshera district of the Peshawar division of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Ed.*] On the evening of 26 January, Mohammad Shah came to Badrashi. He reported to Akbar Shah that they had travelled by car through the town of Jamrud and the Khajuri maidan – west of Peshawar and south of the Khyber Pass – to the border of the Afridi tribal territory. From there, Netaji, Bhagat Ram and the guide had proceeded on foot.

On Sunday, 26 January 1941, that Netaji had disappeared from the Elgin Road house was made public in Calcutta as part of a carefully pre-arranged plan. [*It had earlier been announced that he had decided on a period of seclusion and was not meeting anyone. Thus only a few people, including Sisir, his father Sarat, his mother Bivabati and his cousin Ila knew that Netaji had secretly escaped from the house at 1:30 a.m. on 17 January 1941. Ed.*] On Monday, 27 January, the police arrived at 38/2 Elgin Road and started sniffing around, and the news spread across India and abroad that Subhas Chandra Bose had mysteriously disappeared. By then, Netaji was travelling through the tribal territories – out of reach of the British police – towards Afghanistan and on to Kabul, where he arrived on 31 January 1941. Around 17 March, he was finally able to leave Kabul with the help of the Italian embassy and drove north to the Soviet border. Netaji arrived in Berlin at the beginning of April via the Soviet Union – travelling by train from Samarkand and then by plane from Moscow.

Sometime in April 1941, the police raided Badrashi and ransacked Akbar Shah's house. They did not find anything incriminating but confiscated a handwritten manuscript describing Shah's journey to the Soviet Union in 1920. Shah was taken into custody and given to understand that he was being held under the draconian Defence of India Rules. But he was never charged with any specific offence(s). He was first taken to the Lahore Fort prison for three weeks. Then he was moved to an internment camp for political detainees at Deoli, in Rajasthan, where he stayed for eighteen months. That camp was disbanded after detainees went on hunger strike and Shah was transferred to the Central Jail in Haripur, a town in the Frontier Province, and then to the Central Jail in Peshawar. He was released from there in July 1943 and returned to Badrashi.

Akbar Shah came to know later that Mohammad Shah and Abad Khan had been arrested on the same day as him in April 1941. Mohammad Shah was released from the Peshawar Central Jail along with Akbar Shah in July 1943. But it was Abad



Khan who suffered the most of the Frontier Province men involved in Netaji's escape. Abad Khan was brutally tortured at the notorious Lahore Fort prison – where Sisir too endured a similar ordeal for three and a half months, from mid-October 1944 to early February of 1945. Abad Khan was not released from imprisonment in the Punjab until after the war ended in 1945.

When Sisir and I met with Mian Akbar Shah at his son's home in England in 1983 (how that meeting came about is briefly described below), he told us that Bhagat Ram Talwar – who accompanied Netaji to Kabul and was there with him until his departure from the city in mid-March of 1941 – simply disappeared into thin air. The last time Akbar Shah saw Bhagat Ram was on the morning of 26 January 1941 at Abad Khan's house in Peshawar. He never made contact with Akbar Shah again, and Shah as well as Mohammad Shah and Abad Khan were unable to locate him. Abad Khan came to Calcutta in 1947 to meet Sisir's father, Sarat Chandra Bose. He told Sarat Bose then that, according to his information, Bhagat Ram had been living in comfort in Delhi and Lahore during the war. [*Bhagat Ram Talwar's atrocious betrayal of Netaji and the Indian freedom movement has been public knowledge since the early 1980s, and is briefly referenced in the 'Notes' below this article. Bhagat Ram died in India in 1983. Ed.*]

Mian Akbar Shah continued to live in Badrashi after the partition of India. We had no contact with him, and did not even know if he was alive. In the mid-1970s, the Netaji Research Bureau received information that Akbar Shah was alive and still living in Badrashi.

For several years until the end of the 1970s, Sisir tried very hard to bring to Netaji Bhawan a few of Netaji's comrades in struggle who had lived in Pakistan since August 1947 because their pre-partition homes were there: Major General Mohammad Zaman Kiani, commander of the INA's First Division; Colonel Habib-ur Rahman, the INA's deputy chief of staff and head of its officers' training school, who was also Netaji's companion on his last journey which ended in tragedy in Taipei on 18 August 1945; Colonel Shaukat Malik, the INA officer who raised the national tricolour at Moirang in Manipur on 14 April 1944; and Mian Akbar Shah. The government of India and its ministries of external affairs, defence and home affairs were very cooperative throughout, but Sisir's efforts were not successful. [*The several years of confidential correspondence on this matter between Sisir Bose, the NRB Director, and senior officials of the Indian government are now available in the public domain, having been declassified in 2015–2016 and released to the National Archives of India as part of the 'Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Papers'. Ed.*]

Sisir came closest in January 1977, when Akbar Shah and Shaukat Malik applied for and immediately received Indian visas and set off from their homes in Pakistan.



But Akbar Shah – who was supposed to address the big 23 January gathering at Netaji Bhawan – did not arrive in India as scheduled, and neither did Colonel Malik. NRB members sent to receive Mr Shah waited in vain at Delhi airport on 22 January, and Calcutta airport on the morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup>. We were mystified, and concerned that we might have put him in some danger by inviting him to India. Meanwhile, Habib-ur Rahman passed away in Pakistan in December 1978, and Moham-mad Zaman Kiani in June 1981.

In May 1983, Sisir and I went to Europe and then to the United States for our annual summer vacation. We arrived first into London, and went from there to Cambridge to attend our older son Sugata's PhD convocation. Shortly before that, we had found out that a son of Akbar Shah, Zafar Shah, lived in England – in Walsall, a town in the English West Midlands close to Birmingham. We had also managed to acquire his address and posted him a letter a few weeks before our departure from India, informing him of our visit and saying it would be nice if we could meet.

The day before we left Calcutta, a telegram arrived from Zafar Shah: 'My father and I are eagerly waiting for you.'





Sisir Bose and Akbar Shah reunited in England, 1983. The two key players in Netaji's great escape from India in 1941 met after forty-two years.

It turned out that Mian Akbar Shah was in England for medical treatment and staying with his son in Walsall. They were willing to come to Cambridge to meet with us, but we decided to go to Walsall for the meeting, since Akbar Shah was now eighty-five years old. We set out from Cambridge one morning and reached Walsall around noon after a lovely drive through scenic English countryside. Sisir Bose and Akbar Shah were reunited after forty-two years, for the first time since their



encounter in Calcutta in December 1940. It was truly a memorable moment when the tall, dignified old Pathan entered Zafar's drawing room and enveloped Sisir in a bear hug. He appeared to be in decent health except that he was a little hard of hearing, and wore a hearing aid.

We spent the whole day with Akbar Shah at the home of Zafar and his wife. It was then that Akbar Shah narrated to us the hitherto unknown details of Netaji's arrival in and departure from Peshawar in January 1941, which are recounted in this article. His account completed the story of Subhas Chandra Bose's almost incredible escape from India in 1941.

Akbar Shah told us that when he reached Islamabad airport en route to Calcutta in January 1977, he was intercepted and told that he would not be allowed to go to India. He was devastated and returned to Badrashi. That aside, we found he had a great sense of humour. He roared with laughter as he said to Sisir: 'The British will not believe this is a chance meeting, that you have come to England for your son's convocation and I have come at the same time to my son's place for medical treatment. They will think we have conspired, just as we did back then!'



Akbar Shah and Sisir Bose in England, 1983

After a delicious lunch, we went out into the garden to continue our conversation. Before going out into the garden, Akbar Shah put a Pathan cap on his head. Suddenly, he looked very recognizable! I realized that the one photograph I had seen of Akbar Shah from his revolutionary past as a follower of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose had him wearing the same type of cap.

As dusk fell at the end of the long summer evening, we bade our hosts farewell and got into our car for the return journey. For as long as I looked back, Mian Akbar Shah stood in the doorway of the house, waving to us. I knew we would most probably never see him again, and felt so grateful for the opportunity fate had gifted us to meet with him.



## Notes

*Dr Sisir Kumar Bose first presented his detailed account of Netaji's January 1941 escape from India to a public audience thirty-two years later, in a written address to the First International Netaji Conference convened by Netaji Research Bureau at Kolkata's Netaji Bhawan in January 1973. He has explained the reasons for the delay thus: 'I was never tempted to give my role [in the escape] any undue importance. The escape, I thought, would earn its due place in history through a planned, scientific and long-term effort to document, study and comprehend the sum-total of Netaji's life...Fifteen years of effort laid the foundation...And in 1973 Netaji Research Bureau was in a position to call an international conference on Netaji and the Indian independence movement. It was only then that I felt the time was opportune to present my part of the story in the broader context of studies and research on Netaji and the final phase of our struggle for freedom'.*

*Sisir Bose's account was published in a thick volume containing the entire proceedings of that truly path-breaking First International Netaji Conference: Sisir K. Bose (ed.), Netaji and India's Freedom (Calcutta: Netaji Research Bureau, 1975). Also in 1975, he published the account as a Bengali book, Mahanishkraman (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1975), which has been a bestseller ever since. At the same time, due to the high level of interest that had emerged in the story of the escape across the world, Sisir Bose's account was also published as a book in English, The Great Escape (Calcutta: Netaji Research Bureau, 1975). That book is now in its sixth edition. After Sisir and Krishna Bose met Mian Akbar Shah in England in 1983, Mr Shah provided a written version of what he had orally narrated to them to Netaji Research Bureau. This was included as an appendix titled 'Netaji's Escape: An Untold Chapter' from the third edition (published in 2000) onwards of The Great Escape.*

*Sisir Bose's thrilling, blow-by-blow account of the planning, execution and aftermath of the escape is also there in his book, Subhas and Sarat: An Intimate Memoir of the Bose Brothers (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2016). This is my father's account of first being a ringside eyewitness and then an active participant in our freedom struggle in the 1930s and 1940s. It is the English version of Bosu-Bari, a bestselling Bengali book he published in 1985. He had more or less prepared the English version when he passed away on 30 September 2000. I retrieved the manuscript in 2015, polished it a bit, and it was published with an introduction by me in 2016.*

*In 1981, Milan Hauner, a historian from Czechoslovakia who had settled in the United States, published a major research monograph titled India in Axis Strategy. Hauner*



had been among the many scholars from across the world who attended and spoke at the international conference at Netaji Bhawan in January 1973. Hauner's book included incontrovertible evidence Hauner had found in British archives in the late 1970s that Bhagat Ram Talwar – who accompanied Netaji from Peshawar to Kabul in late January 1941 and was with him in Kabul until March – had betrayed the Indian freedom struggle and operated as a British spy and agent, codenamed 'Silver', from 1942 to 1945. The full extent of Bhagat Ram's treachery was exposed in a meticulously researched book published in 2016 by Mihir Bose, an Indian journalist and writer based in London – Silver: The Most Remarkable Agent of the Second World War (London: Fonthill, 2016). Ed.



The Liberated Lands

Visiting Manipur and the Andamans



## THE BATTLEFIELDS OF MANIPUR

Robert Browning, my favourite English poet, wrote a poem called 'The Last Ride Together' in 1855. It is in the form of a monologue by a spurned lover on a last horse ride with the woman who has rejected him. In the sixth of its ten stanzas, the rejected lover says that he is still far better off than famous statesmen and soldiers. What do so-called statesmen get but a passing mention in history: 'Ten lines, a statesman's life in each!' As for soldiers, their fate is even worse: 'The flag stuck, on a heap of bones. A soldier's doing! what atones? They scratch his name on the Abbey-stones. My riding is better, by their leave.'

On my recent visit to Manipur [*in October 1972, ed.*], I felt that Browning was not quite right. The geographically peripheral Indian state of Manipur, bordering Burma, was the site of a valiant struggle waged in the latter part of World War II in the cause of India's freedom. The soldier-statesman who was its inspiration and leader, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, is etched forever in the minds and hearts of the people of India. And the soldiers of the Indian National Army who came to Manipur, and fought heroically against great odds for India's liberation from tyranny and slavery, are forever honoured and immortal in the memory of the people of Manipur, and across India. They are anything but a flag stuck on a heap of bones.

The most memorable moment of that struggle came on 14 April 1944. A force of the INA's Bahadur Group (special forward units), commanded by Colonel Shaukat Malik, had in early April reached the vicinity of Moirang, a town just twenty-five miles south of the capital, Imphal. They reached Moirang, an ancient seat of Manipuri kings on the banks of the scenic Loktak Lake, by advancing from the south, along the Tiddim Road from Burma. [*Tiddim is 150 miles south of Imphal. Ed.*] The Bahadur Group detachment set up base in Moirang for the imminent assault on Imphal from three directions by Japanese and INA forces. Colonel Malik established his command centre in the family house of a young (b. 1912) Moirang resident, H. Nilamani Singh. That modest house still stands, with machine-gun marks visible. [*It continues to be a major tourist attraction fifty years after Sisir and Krishna Bose's 1972 visit. Sisir and Krishna again visited Manipur in October 1985 with their younger son Sumantra and Colonel Prem Sahgal of the INA. Ed.*]

On 14 April, the INA soldiers and hundreds of local residents including Nilamani Singh and another local youth, M. Koireng Singh (1915–1994) gathered together and Colonel Malik hoisted the national tricolour – saffron, white and green with the charkha in the centre – at Moirang. Moirang entered history as the first place on liberated soil in mainland India where the national flag was raised by the INA.



Earlier on 30 December 1943, Netaji had himself raised the tricolour in the Gymkhana ground [now Netaji Stadium, ed.] at Port Blair, the capital of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.



The Indian National Army enters India, 1944

By a happy coincidence, 14 April is New Year Day in the Manipuri calendar. Colonel Malik made a rousing speech in Hindustani, which Koireng Singh translated for the locals. He told the locals that he and his soldiers were representing the Provisional Government of Free India declared by Netaji, and the Indian National Army was pledged to raise the national tricolour on the Red Fort in Delhi. He asked for their support in the struggle. Captain Ito, a Japanese officer, also spoke. For the next three months, until mid-July 1944, Shaukat Malik and his troops camped at Moirang and were sustained by rice, vegetables and dried fish provided by the local people.



Chalo Dilli!

The people of Manipur regard the flag-hoisting in Moirang as a milestone event in their modern history. When Sisir and I arrived in Moirang, we found an attractive



INA memorial complex almost complete. It includes a war museum, a public library, an auditorium and a replica of the INA martyrs' monument built on Singapore's seafront in August 1945, which was dynamited by the British a fortnight after it came up – all set in pretty gardens. The replica monument is inscribed, as the original was, with the INA motto: *Itmad* (Faith), *Ittefaq* (Unity) and *Qurbani* (Sacrifice). Just opposite the monument stands a new bronze statue of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. President V. V. Giri came from Delhi to unveil the statue and inaugurate the memorial complex, and we from Calcutta as guests. The date chosen for the inauguration was 21 October 1972, the anniversary of the proclamation of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind by Netaji in Singapore in 1943. [*Giri, a distinguished freedom fighter, was the Republic of India's fourth president, from 1969 to 1974. Ed.*]

As we descended the steps of the plane at Imphal airport, I was startled to be greeted by a military band playing the national anthem '*Jana Gana Mana*' and an army guard-of-honour on the tarmac. We learned that it was a dress rehearsal for President Giri's arrival. Moirang, a small town, was buzzing with activity in preparation for the ceremony. Helicopters were taking off and landing, army drills were taking place, and lighting and floral arrangements were being finalized.

As I watched the preparations, I was reminded of the planning for another ceremony in April 1944. Imphal was then besieged from three sides by the Japanese and INA forces. The Bahadur Group was active in the Bishenpur–Moirang sector just south of Imphal. To Imphal's north, Shah Nawaz Khan's Subhas Brigade, part of the INA's First Division, and Japanese troops had cut the Imphal–Kohima road. To Imphal's east, Mohammad Zaman Kiani, commander of the INA's First Division, was directing operations from his mountain base and the division's Gandhi Brigade led by Colonel Inayat Kiani was fighting in the Patel–Tengnoupal sector. In mid-April, Imphal's fall was considered inevitable and imminent. There were discussions that Netaji would come to the victory parade at Imphal's race course. It was expected that after the British debacle at Imphal, the INA's momentum would be unstoppable and uprisings would erupt in India.

The Imphal campaign, of course, stalled and then failed. Around the time the siege of Imphal was fully established, Netaji had a meeting over dinner in Burma with General Renya Mutaguchi, the commander of the Japanese Fifteenth Army which was engaged in the offensive – codenamed 'Operation U-Go'. Iwaichi Fujiwara, the Japanese military intelligence officer who was instrumental in the formation of the INA in Singapore in 1942 and has remained a great friend of India, was also present. [*Fujiwara, who retired as a lieutenant general in the post-war Japan Self-Defence Forces in the mid-1960s, was a dear friend of Sisir and Krishna Bose and*



was closely connected with Netaji Research Bureau until his death in 1986. Ed.] Netaji suggested to Mutaguchi that an escape route for the trapped British forces in and around Imphal be kept open so they could retreat from their seemingly hopeless situation. Some of the field commanders of the Japanese divisions of the Fifteenth Army thrusting towards Imphal and Kohima held the same view. But Mutaguchi was adamant that he wanted to force a British surrender at Imphal.

This ambition was excessive because although besieged, the British forces around Imphal were being continuously reinforced and resupplied by air because of the near-complete British and American dominance of the skies. The Japanese and the INA, on the other hand, had overextended, tenuous supply lines running way back across hilly jungle terrain into Burma, and had almost no air support. Mutaguchi's obstinacy may have proved very costly for the advance into India. From May the torrential monsoon set in, gravely compounding the supply problem, and the air supremacy of the British and their American allies eventually proved decisive. [Sisir Bose, who was then working for Netaji's underground in Calcutta, writes in his memoir *Subhas and Sarat*: 'We heard that the Japanese and INA forces had reached Kohima and encircled Imphal. There was total panic among the British and their Indian collaborators at this time. It was widely rumoured that the British military command was planning to abandon not just the northeast, but also Bengal, and retreat to a new defence line in central Bihar.' Ed.]

The seeds of the failure at Imphal however ran much deeper. The Japanese had been poised on the Burma-India frontier since mid-1942. But it was mid-1943 before Netaji could arrive in Southeast Asia from Europe after an epic three-month submarine journey, and it was only then that the INA was revitalized and the Azad Hind movement got a fresh lease of life. Thus, a crucial year was lost when the British were completely on the defensive after being driven out of the whole of Southeast Asia and back in utter disarray into India by the Japanese. Even after Netaji arrived, it took several hectic months to move the battle-ready regiments of the INA First Division from Singapore and Malaya to Burma. They had to leave their much-needed heavier weaponry behind due to inadequate transport, and carried mostly light arms. The INA's forward headquarters was moved to Rangoon by the end of 1943 and Netaji himself moved there from Singapore in early January of 1944. In January-February 1944, Japanese and INA forces penetrated the Arakans and scored some notable successes. But the main assault force for the advance into India was massed further north on the banks of the Chindwin river in Burma, facing Manipur and the (then) Naga Hills of Assam.

In December 1943, Marshal Terauchi, the commander-in-chief of Japanese forces in Southeast Asia, sent an emissary to Tokyo to ask Prime Minister Hideki

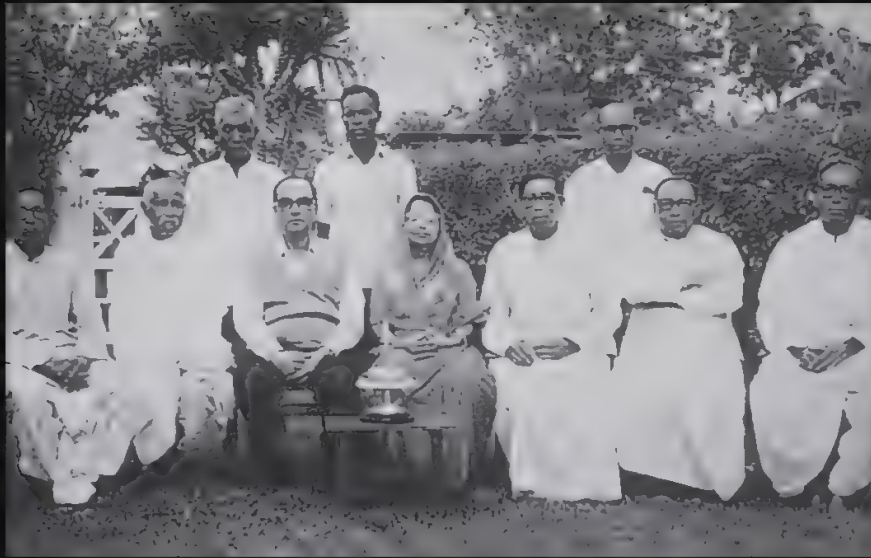


Tojo's consent for the advance into India. Tojo's military secretary escorted the emissary to Tojo's house, only to be told: 'The Prime Minister is in the bath.' From the bath, Tojo asked if the operation could proceed with minimal air support – the Japanese, overextended in the Pacific, had almost no airpower to spare for the advance into India – and whether the long supply lines across tough terrain into northeast India were sustainable. He then gave his approval. But it was another three months, mid-March 1944, before the Japanese and the INA actually advanced into India. The first INA units entered India on 18 March 1944. The offensive thrusts made rapid progress, driving the British forces back from the Burma border to the Imphal area. Had Netaji reached Asia earlier and the thrust into northeast India happened in 1943, it is likely that the course of the fighting in India's northeast would have been very different.

General Masakazu Kawabe, the commander of Japan's Burma Area Army, was an admirer of Netaji's and a well wisher of the quest for India's freedom. He realized that Operation U-Go had a political significance far beyond its military aspects. Netaji had met Kawabe in Rangoon on 7 January 1944 and told him: 'The first drop of blood spilled on Indian soil must be that of an Indian.' Kawabe delayed giving the order to retreat for some time after it became clear that Operation U-Go was not progressing as planned. Finally, the order to retreat came on 8 July 1944 – Netaji's own directive to Mohammad Zaman Kiani came on 10 July – and a heroic retreat from northeast India back into Burma began just after mid-July. The retreating Japanese and INA troops were struck down in the thousands by hunger, diseases such as malaria, typhus and dysentery which proliferated with the advent of the monsoon rains, and strafing and bombing by British and American warplanes.

But for three to four months before then, large parts of Manipur had been electrified by the arrival of the Indian National Army and its message of freedom. The entire southern half of Manipur, an area of at least 10,000–12,000 square kilometres, was for nearly four months under the authority of the Azad Hind Government with its local headquarters in Moirang. On 20 July 1944, a band of seventeen young Manipuris left their homes and joined the INA retreat. They were fifteen young men (including M. Koireng Singh and H. Nilamani Singh, both from Moirang) and two young women – Keinya Devi and Randhoni Devi. All were members of the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha, a patriotic organization.





Sisir and Krishna Bose with Manipuri veterans of the INA during their visit to Manipur, October 1972

It took them almost three months to reach Rangoon, walking all the way across hill ranges and through dense jungles. They hid out during the day to escape aerial strafing and bombing, and marched during the night. Four of the seventeen patriots were from Moirang, and the other thirteen had come to the liberated territories from Imphal and other towns. When they finally reached Rangoon, they had a meeting with Netaji. Nilamani Singh's father, H. Thambaljao Singh, had given his son his life savings – three thousand rupees – to hand over to Netaji for the movement. Nilamani did so and Netaji gratefully accepted it. When the British retook Rangoon in May 1945, the Manipuri patriots were arrested and incarcerated in the Rangoon Central Jail for seven months, and then transferred to detention in Calcutta. They eventually arrived back in Imphal, to mass acclaim, in May 1946. All of those still living among the famous group of seventeen came to meet Sisir and myself in Imphal.

Koireng Singh and Nilamani Singh – declared 'traitors' by the British in 1944 – both rose to great prominence in the public life and politics of Manipur after independence. Koireng Singh – popularly known as 'Moirang Koireng' – became the first elected Chief Minister of Manipur in 1963 and held that post for most of the time until 1969. Nilamani Singh, who became a renowned educationist, was our main guide in Moirang and elsewhere in the battlefields of Manipur. He made time to do so despite a busy schedule – he is both the legislator in the Manipur state assembly (MLA) from Moirang and Manipur's minister of education. [*Nilamani Singh was elected to the Manipur state assembly in 1972 and became a minister. Koireng Singh again represented his native Moirang in the state assembly from 1980 until his death in 1994. Ed.*]

Thanks to Nilamani Singh, we met a most interesting participant in the INA's



struggle in Manipur – Naki Mohammad, a tall and dignified-looking man in advanced middle age. He came to see us in Imphal, and his story is fascinating. A Manipuri Muslim [*Almost 10 percent of Manipur's population is Muslim. Ed.*], he had joined the British-Indian Army in his youth and was among the 45,000 Indian soldiers of the defeated British army who surrendered to the Japanese in Singapore in February 1942. Like most of them, he joined the INA and in time came to be assigned to the Bahadur Group troop commanded by Shaukat Malik which arrived in Moirang in April 1944. Naki Mohammad had left his homeland to fight for the British Empire; he returned as a soldier of India's army of liberation. He was obviously a very valued member of Malik's Bahadur Group unit because he was a native of Manipur. It was he, speaking the local language, who came into the town of Moirang first and made contact with Nilamani Singh's family. He informed the locals about the INA and asked for their support.

Naki Mohammad was close to Shaukat Malik and remembered his former commander fondly. Between April and July 1944, Malik would frequently send Naki Mohammad on dangerous missions into British-held territory from the Moirang base to gather intelligence. Naki Mohammad's own family also lived in the British-held area of Manipur and Malik gave him permission to go and see them. But he knew that was very risky and did not do so. Eventually, he was caught during a mission in British-held territory. He was taken to the Red Fort in Delhi as a prisoner and then incarcerated in Punjab's Multan jail until the end of the war.

Naki Mohammad now earns a modest livelihood as a peon. When I met him, I felt that here was one of those unknown, self-effacing and neglected fighters to whom India owes its freedom. He is very proud of that contribution and has no bitterness whatsoever about the lack of recognition. After the partition of India, Shaukat Malik became a Pakistani because his home is in Bahawalpur, in the southern part of (West) Pakistan's Punjab province. Colonel Malik contacted him and offered him employment in West Pakistan. But Naki Mohammad chose to stay in his native Manipur, at the other end of the divided subcontinent.

I do not know if I will ever have a chance to meet Colonel Shaukat Malik. I hope so – by all accounts he is a most lively and colourful character. Colonel Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon, another great INA hero, has told me many stories about him. When Malik returned to Rangoon after the retreat from India, Netaji threw a dinner party in his honour. Malik had too much to drink at the party and became inebriated. In that condition, he started calling out: 'Netaji! Netaji!' Having failed to get his leader's attention, he stamped his foot on the floor and yelled: 'Netaji! My foot!' Netaji looked at him briefly and resumed a conversation with Dr Ba Maw, the premier of Burma. All the senior INA officers present were acutely embarrassed by Shaukat's



antics. Colonel Habib-ur Rahman quickly took the intoxicated officer out of the gathering.

The next morning, Shaukat Malik turned up at Netaji's residence and requested his ADC, Captain Shamsheer Singh, for an audience. Granted the audience, he stood in front of Netaji's desk, unholstered his revolver, and placed it on the desk. He then told Netaji that his behaviour the previous evening had been unbecoming of an INA officer and therefore he did not wish to live any longer. However, since suicide is forbidden in Islam, he wished Netaji to execute him personally, in which case he would definitely go to *behesht* (paradise).

Netaji broke into a smile and told Shaukat that he simply needed some rest and relaxation. He told Shaukat that he was only too aware of what hardship the INA's officers and men who had fought in India had been through. He then gave Shaukat some money and told him to have a holiday in Bangkok before reporting back for duty. A few days later, Dhillon ran into Malik at Rangoon airport, waiting to catch a flight to Bangkok. Shaukat insisted on giving Dhillon some of the money Netaji had given him and then ran to catch the flight to Bangkok. [*Colonel Shaukat Malik was to come to Netaji Bhawan in Calcutta in January 1977 for the commemoration of Netaji's eightieth birth anniversary. He had been granted an Indian visa but was at the last moment not allowed to travel to India by the Pakistani authorities. Ed.*]

We were surprised to be told by Koirang Singh, Nilamani Singh and other Manipuri friends that Netaji had visited the front in Manipur shortly before the INA's retreat began. [*Prior to this revelation, it was not known that Netaji had entered India during the war, although there were rumours to that effect. Ed.*] They said he came to Churachandpur, some distance south of Moirang. We drove to the town of Churachandpur, the centre of a large district of the same name. We made enquiries in the bustling, prosperous hill town about anyone who may have witnessed a visit by Netaji in 1944. We were directed to a village called Saikot four miles east of the town, and told that the raja of Saikot, who was still alive, had met Netaji during World War II. We went off in search of the raja.

We entered Saikot expecting to find a palace or castle where the raja lived, and instead found that he lives in a dilapidated hut-like dwelling. He was not at home when we arrived, but turned up as we were about to leave. He is a very friendly man, seventy-five years old, and his name is Kolbel. And he is a raja all right – among tribes in Manipur, it is customary to refer to the village chief by the title 'Raja'. Kolbel was dressed in a frayed Western-style suit which had a medal attached to its lapel. It turned out that he had received the medal for fighting as a soldier in France during World War I.

Raja Kolbel gave us a clear and detailed account of Netaji's visit to his village



twenty-eight years earlier. He recalls the exact date: 2 July 1944. There was a large INA camp on the hill above the village. Netaji came to inspect that camp and meet the soldiers. He then came down to the village and met with the locals. Raja Kolbel greeted him. Netaji was in military uniform. He had a hipholstered revolver and a short sword hung from the other hip. At 7 p.m., Netaji sat down under the large tree in Kolbel's garden. The villagers have preserved that tree with great care.

It was a brightly moonlit night. The garden slopes down to a river. The INA soldiers came down from their camp and gathered on that slope. They all sat down on the slope. They numbered in the hundreds, but the villagers prepared and served steaming-hot tea to all of them. Netaji gave a short speech to the assembled soldiers. Kolbel offered Netaji milk in a tumbler. Netaji asked why he was being given milk rather than tea like everyone else. Kolbel explained that it is their custom to offer milk to distinguished visitors. Netaji said in that case, he would have the milk, but generally he ate and drank only what his soldiers did.

Netaji told Kolbel that he knew the local villages had been supplying essential foodstuffs to the INA soldiers for quite some time, since their arrival. He was deeply appreciative of the help and told Kolbel that he would not forget their generosity once India was free. Before leaving, Netaji wrote a note of thanks on a piece of paper and gave it to Kolbel to keep, but cautioned him that he would face adverse consequences if the note fell into the hands of the British. After the INA retreated, Kolbel put the note along with some other items in a box which he buried under the earth nearby. Water seeped into the box and the handwritten note was spoiled.

We discussed why Netaji came to the Churachandpur area rather than to other areas of the Manipur front. Kolbel ventured a guess. He thinks it may have been because the access routes into Churachandpur from Burma are comparatively shorter and the terrain somewhat less harsh than in other parts of Manipur. He also noted there was severe shortage of petrol on both sides of the border during the war, which made lengthy journeys by motor vehicles difficult.





The INA's Supreme Commander at the front





Netaji with the soldiers of an INA anti-aircraft battery

We appreciated just how tough the terrain the INA's troops had to negotiate is when we drove from Imphal to the town of Moreh on the Burma border with Nilamani Singh. The road running south from Imphal to Moirang is largely on flat terrain, dotted with hills and hillocks. But beyond that, the Imphal valley ends and the mountains begin. After Moirang, the Palel-Tamu road, which we took, runs south-east through rugged mountainous landscape – some of it densely forested – to Moreh. On the other side of the border from Moreh lies the Burmese town of Tamu. It was on the Tamu–Moreh route that the bulk of the INA First Division, especially its Gandhi Brigade, entered India in March–April 1944 and it was also on this route that they retreated back into Burma from Manipur.

The town of Bishenpur lies off the Imphal–Moirang road. From Bishenpur, another road led west towards Silchar in Assam, so Bishenpur was an important crossroads for both sides in 1944. Capturing Bishenpur was essential to the Japanese–INA offensive to take Imphal, and for that reason the British forces there clung on grimly. Overlooking Bishenpur there is a medium-sized hill known locally as 'Red Hill', just about ten miles south of Imphal. Red Hill was the site of a particularly ferocious battle with hand-to-hand fighting in late May of 1944. Red Hill was strewn with human bones from that battle even a few years ago, and is a site of pilgrimage for many Japanese families who lost their loved ones in the Imphal offensive.





INA and Japanese soldiers exult after capturing a strategic hilltop in Manipur, 1944. The national tricolour planted on the captured target is visible.

But Sisir and I climbed up a serene green hill. Near the top, Nilamani Singh showed us a small stone slab with a simple inscription: 'To the Unknown Soldier of the Indian National Army'. It was a deeply moving experience. We had visited the cemetery of the British war-dead in Imphal, which is maintained very well by their Commonwealth War Graves Commission. That too was moving. One tombstone read: 'E.W. Hopkins, Royal Armoured Corps. Rest in Peace, Loving Son'. He had died at twenty-one. But it seemed to me that the simple stone slab on a hillside with a history, dedicated to the unknown martyrs of the INA and put there by the local people, is a far more powerful memorial than the well-tended Commonwealth cemetery in Imphal.

Our next stop was the small town of Ningthoukhong, which lies between Bishenpur and Moirang. A large village in 1944, it was completely destroyed in the fighting, which included tank battles, between the Japanese and INA forces and the British. The village changed hands several times and there was nothing left of Ningthoukhong by the time the fighting ended. It was rebuilt and repopulated after the war. A British officer, Colonel Eustace, has written about deadly, close-range combat in Ningthoukhong. Once, among the bodies and the smouldering ruins, he spotted an incongruous sight: a beautiful drawing of the deities Radha and Krishna etched on a mud wall. Ningthoukhong was the closest point to Imphal that came under the authority of the Azad Hind Government. According to the local lore, ghosts haunted the place for quite some time after the war.





INA troops charge the enemy.

Turning southeast after Moirang, we passed through Pael. Now just a sleepy village, Pael was a major focus of fighting in 1944. Located on the southeastern edge of the Imphal valley, it had an airstrip vital to British operations. Beyond Pael, the road runs for another forty miles to Moreh on the Burma border. The Pael–Moreh route, through rugged mountains, has a bleak beauty. Some of the ranges are thickly forested, but there are bare peaks where only a few trees struck by lightning stand like mute sentinels. The road climbs steeply after Pael (2,700 feet) and about one-third of the way to Moreh lies the village of Tengenupal, the highest point on the road at an elevation of 4,800 feet. The mountainous Pael–Tengenupal area was where Inayat Kiani's Gandhi Brigade and the Japanese Yamamoto Force (named after its commander, Gen. Tsunoru Yamamoto) were most active. The area saw intense combat in April 1944 and several peaks overlooking the road were fiercely contested, changing hands multiple times. One such bleakly bare peak was named 'Scraggy Hill' by the British and 'Ito Hill' by the Japanese.



The INA in action

The Gandhi Brigade launched a strong attack on the Pael airstrip at the end of



April, which was repelled by the British forces after heavy fighting. But Inayat Kiani and his men did not give up. At the beginning of July, by which time the tide of the war had turned decisively against the INA and Japanese, Inayat Kiani launched another attack on the Palel airstrip. This time, the attack was successful and the INA assault force destroyed half a dozen enemy aircraft. Nilamani Singh said to us solemnly: 'The Palel airstrip was in our hands for three days.' The British were probably not expecting such an audacious raid at that stage of the fighting.



INA troops about to go into combat

The success at Palel came too late to make a difference to the course of the war, but it showed the fighting spirit of the INA's soldiers. The feat was all the more remarkable because by this time the INA frontline units were low on ammunition and close to starvation, reduced to eating grass-like substances foraged from the scrub jungle to survive. Major (later General) Fujiwara of Japanese military intelligence spent three months with the INA in the Palel–Moreh sector and was stunned by the resilience of its soldiers. [*The INA and the Japanese had virtually no air support and very little motorized transport. Gen. Mohammad Zaman Kiani, the INA's top commander at the Manipur front, has written in his memoir that meanwhile 'the British could bring more troops by rail and road up to Kohima and keep them supplied and their IV Corps, fighting in the Imphal valley, was being reinforced and maintained through uninterrupted air operations' through the Imphal airfield. The railhead he is referring to is Dimapur, north of Kohima. Ed.*]

We stopped for a little while at Tengnoupal before going on to Moreh. Tengnoupal was foggy and reminded me a bit of Kurseong, near Darjeeling. Even the altitude, 4,800 feet, is identical.

At Moreh, a bustling trading town, we stood by the Lokchao river, which marks the India–Burma border. The Burmese town of Tamu lies just beyond the border. We were accompanied from Calcutta by Mr Naga Sundaram, a devoted full-time worker of Netaji Research Bureau. Sundaram, originally from Tamil Nadu, was a small shopkeeper in Rangoon when he joined the INA. He entered Manipur and



India through Tamu in 1944 as a soldier of the INA's field propaganda unit, whose task was to gain civilian support and induce defections by Indian troops fighting for the enemy, and spent some time in Moreh. He had returned after twenty-eight years.

Sundaram showed us the spot by the river, next to a pile of boulders, where their camp was located. He recalled that he and his comrades would throw mosquito nets into the river and catch fish. They would cook the fish and eat it along with boiled grass. Standing on the bridge across the Lokchao, I leaned over and saw that some debris from the old bridge destroyed in World War II is still lodged in the river-bottom. [M. Z. Kiani has written in his memoir that the withdrawing INA troops crossed the Lokchao with difficulty in late July 1944 because the river was very swollen by the monsoon rains. Ed.] The Border Security Force (BSF) personnel at Moreh were thrilled to hear Sundaram's stories. [N. Sundaram came to Calcutta after the war and lived and worked at Netaji Bhawan from 1946 until his death in 1998, with only occasional visits to his wife and children in Tamil Nadu. Mr Sundaram was Sisir Bose's right-hand man at Netaji Research Bureau from its establishment at Netaji Bhawan in 1957 until he passed away forty-one years later. Ed.]

After the gruelling retreat, during which several thousand INA soldiers of various ranks perished from hunger, disease and aerial attacks, Netaji individually met all the senior officers who had returned to Burma. He felt they were not telling him the whole truth about how much they and their men had suffered. So he beseeched Abid Hasan, who had worked with him in Germany since 1941 and accompanied him on the epic submarine voyage in 1943 from Europe to East Asia, to tell him the truth. Unlike the other senior officers, Abid Hasan was not from an army background but had received military training in Germany and held the rank of Major in the INA. He was sent into Manipur to help extricate the INA forces under heavy artillery shelling and aerial bombardment. Abid Hasan simply repeated to Netaji what a Japanese officer had said to him when he arrived in Manipur: 'To tell you roughly, the situation is slightly not so very good.'

So many popular World War II movies have been made, and continue to be made, by the Americans, the British and the Russians. These films tell their side of the story and their versions of history, their tales of heroism and valour. The whole world consumes these productions, including we Indians. I wish our film industry would pay more attention to the one truly Indian story of the Second World War – that of the Azad Hind Fauj. That would not only inform and inspire our youth of today. It would present the final, climactic struggle for India's freedom in the midst of a raging global war from the Indian perspective, and contest the self-serving narrative peddled by our erstwhile imperial masters. The saga of the battlefields of



Manipur is ideal material for riveting cinema.

The return drive from Moreh to Imphal I will remember for a long time. This is the main route the INA took in 1944 in its quest to liberate India. The sun set over the mountains just as we reached Tengnoupal. After that we drove carefully in the dark, the winding road illuminated only by our vehicle's headlights. The only sound was the faint rustling of trees.

Netaji had told the INA's men and women: 'There, there in the distance – beyond that river, beyond those jungles, beyond those hills – lies the promised land, the soil from which we sprang, the land to which we shall now return. Hark! India is calling, India's metropolis Delhi is calling, three hundred and eighty-eight millions of our countrymen are calling. Blood is calling to blood. Get up, there is no time to lose. Take up your arms. There, in front of you, is the road our pioneers have built. We shall march along that road. We shall carve our way through the enemy's ranks or, if God wills, we shall die a martyr's death. And in our last sleep we shall kiss the road that will bring our army to Delhi. The road to Delhi is the road to freedom. Chalo Delhi!'

So many brave Indians, I thought as we drove towards Imphal, had kissed this very road and died a martyr's death.

On 8 July 1945, Netaji laid the foundation stone of the INA martyrs' monument on the seafront of Singapore, where the INA had been born in 1942. He said: 'The future generations of Indians who will be born not as slaves but as free men because of your colossal sacrifice, will bless your names and proudly proclaim to the world that you, their forebears, fought and suffered reverses in the battles of Manipur, Assam and Burma, but through temporary failure you paved the way to ultimate success and glory.'

This proved prophetic and indeed came true within months of the end of the war. *[On 6 September 1945, after the British re-occupation of Singapore, the INA martyrs' monument was dynamited to rubble on the order of Lord Mountbatten. Ed.]*

As we left Manipur, President Abraham Lincoln's famous 1863 address commemorating the Battle of Gettysburg, the turning point of the American Civil War, rang in my ears: 'We cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work that they who fought here have so nobly advanced. It is for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us, that from these honoured dead we take increased devotion to that cause to which they gave their last full measure of devotion, that we here highly resolve



that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.'



## SHAHEED AND SWARAJ: VISITING THE ANDAMANS

When Sisir and I decided to visit the Andaman Islands at the far end of the Bay of Bengal [*in October 1969, ed.*], we got two kinds of reactions. Some elders shuddered and said: '*Kala Pani!*' (Black Waters). This term refers fundamentally to the once prevalent cultural taboo among Indians to crossing seas. But in the early twentieth century the term also came to refer specifically to the most notorious prison of the British Raj, the Cellular Jail in the Andamans, where tens of thousands of Indian freedom fighters were sent and incarcerated in worse than sub-human conditions between the first decade of the century and the end-1930s. Some young friends, on the other hand, were excited to hear where we were going. They had heard that the Andamans are a great place for a holiday, and indeed honeymoons. To this generation, 'Andaman' conjures up vistas of natural beauty, not the *Kala Pani* taboo or the horrors of the Cellular Jail.

Our motive for going to the Andamans was not touristic. We went partly on a pilgrimage and partly on a sentimental journey. On 30 December 1943, the souls of the thousands of our most valiant freedom fighters who suffered almost unimaginably and met horrible deaths in the Cellular Jail – and before that in the second half of the nineteenth century in the Viper Island prison, its predecessor – received, I think, some peace. On that day, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose raised the national tricolour – saffron, white and green with the charkha emblem in the centre – at Port Blair, the capital of the Andamans. During that brief visit at the end of December 1943, he renamed the Andaman Islands as Shaheed, in honour of those martyrs, and the Nicobar Islands further to the south as Swaraj (Freedom).

As the plane descended to land, the pilot announced: 'A good view of Port Blair on your left.' I looked out and saw that the endless blue sea during our flight from Calcutta had changed and a deep green landscape had come into view. Then the Cellular Jail, standing like a grim castle, came into sight. It was a very clear aerial view that sent chills down my spine. I know the comparison is odd but I had had the same kind of slightly eerie feeling standing before the portrait of the Mona Lisa at the Louvre in Paris. I was now seeing for real what I had previously seen only in photographs.





Krishna Bose visiting the Cellular Jail, 2003

The plane had a somewhat unsteady landing and finally came to a trembling halt. Disembarking, I noticed the unusual intensity of the sunlight. Sheltering under the plane's wings on the tarmac, I watched a number of large boxes stamped 'Netaji Research Bureau' emerge from the belly of the aircraft, the cargo hold. They contained the materials for an exhibition on Netaji, the Azad Hind movement and the Indian National Army in Port Blair to coincide with the twenty-sixth anniversary of



Netaji's proclamation of the Provisional Government of Free India (*Arzi Hukumat-e Azad Hind*) in Singapore on 21 October 1943.

Standing there, I looked up and around and had a strange feeling of familiarity with the scenery, like something seen in a dream or in distant childhood. The landing strip is on a piece of level ground, framed by hills on three sides. An elderly Sikh policeman standing by the plane told me that the asphalt landing strip was built by the Japanese during World War II – prior to that, the British had a gravel strip suitable only for small-sized military aircraft. But why did the scenery look familiar? Mr Atulendu Sen, a member of Netaji Research Bureau who had accompanied us from Calcutta, solved the puzzle by producing a black-and-white photograph. In it, Netaji is seen inspecting a guard of honour on this very landing strip framed by hills, on his arrival at Port Blair on 29 December 1943. I had seen this photograph many times before, hence the sense of familiarity!

I fell in love with the picturesque Andamans as soon as we arrived at the tourist bungalow. On one side the peaceful dark blue sea stretched to the horizon, its gentle waves giving it the form of a delicately embroidered carpet. The sky on the horizon was a light blue, flecked with small white clouds. On the other side lay dark green hills dotted with banana and coconut groves. I felt that at any moment Maria von Trapp would come down those hillsides singing 'The hills are alive with the sound of music ... With songs they have sung for a thousand years ... The hills fill my heart with the sound of music'.

The commemoration of the 21 October anniversary caused quite a sensation in Port Blair. In the morning there was a crowded ceremony at the airport – which is just as it was in 1943 – where a giant-sized photograph of Netaji as the INA Supreme Commander was unveiled. An all-party delegation of parliamentarians from the 'mainland' attended. Then in the evening, crowds spilled over at the inauguration of Netaji Research Bureau's exhibition in Port Blair. The rain did not seem to discourage the crowds one bit. I noticed that the greatest interest was in the 'Netaji in the Andamans' panel of the exhibition.

The Cellular Jail is a monstrosity in more ways than one. The houses and buildings in the Andamans are by tradition all made of wood. But this is a massive brick-and-mortar structure, which consisted of seven long wings, each three storeys high, converging on a central watchtower. [*The jail took a decade to build, between 1896 and 1906. Ed.*] There were almost 700 tiny solitary-confinement cells in all, arranged in such a way that no prisoner could see any other prisoner. We heard that huge quantities of bricks arrived by ship across the Andaman Sea from Rangoon in Burma, and then the prisoners already in the Andamans were put to work to construct the new jail.



The Andamans penal colony was established initially after the great Indian revolt of 1857–58, when hundreds of captured fighters of the first war of independence were transported there for life – or rather, until they died of exhaustion from back-breaking forced labour, sadistic physical abuse by the British jailers, snakebite, or simply from the inhuman conditions which drove many insane and led others to commit suicide. Before the 1860s, when this grotesque penal settlement was created, the indigenous peoples were virtually the only inhabitants of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Gradually, criminal convicts also began to be sent to the Andamans. In 1872, one such convict, Sher Ali Afridi from the North-West Frontier Province, assassinated Lord Mayo, the viceroy of India, during his visit to the Andamans in a memorable act of defiance and revenge.

The Cellular Jail was named after its chilling geometric design, based on the modern nineteenth-century 'Panopticon' concept of ultra-punitive detention facilities pioneered in England, in which inmates would be isolated from each other but all could be kept under constant watch by the guards. Its completion more or less coincided with the rise of nationalist consciousness and organized anti-colonial resistance in India. From its opening until the late 1930s, thousands of Indians deemed very dangerous by the British rulers – i.e., the most valiant of our patriots and revolutionaries – were sent to the Cellular Jail, most never to return. Hangings were frequent, and many others died because of the unendurable conditions and forced labour, from malaria and snakebite, or from savage torture by the British jailers. Hunger strikes were common. In 1933, dozens of prisoners went on hunger strike to protest their conditions and treatment. Three – Mahavir Singh of the Punjab and Mohit Moitra and Mohan Kishore Namadas, both from Bengal – died when milk choked their lungs during force-feeding.

No other prison of the British Empire came close in notoriety to the Cellular Jail except the Lahore Fort prison in the Punjab, where conditions were similar. My husband Sisir was incarcerated at the Lahore Fort in 1944–45, following in the footsteps of Bhagat Singh, Raj Guru, Sukhdev and many others. [*Sisir Kumar Bose has written in vivid detail about his time in the Lahore Fort in his memoir Subhas and Sarat. Ed.*] In 1939, after a major protest movement across India in which Sisir took part as a college student in Calcutta, the final batch of political detainees at the Cellular Jail were repatriated to prisons on the mainland.

Remarkably, the ghastly conditions of the Cellular Jail failed to break the will and spirit of the vast majority of the freedom fighters who were sent there. An exception was Vinayak Damodar (V. D.) Savarkar (1883–1966), best known as the pioneering ideologue of Hindu nationalism. [*He coined the term 'Hindutva' and elaborated its doctrine during the first half of the 1920s and later, from 1937 until 1944,*



*was the president of the Hindu Mahasabha party, which actively collaborated with the Raj. Ed.] We saw the cell in which Savarkar was kept and found a small photograph of his hanging in it. Savarkar spent ten years in the Cellular Jail, from 1911 to 1921, when he was moved to the Ratnagiri prison in his native Maharashtra before being released altogether in 1924. [He completely abandoned anti-imperialist activity and was never again arrested by the British. Ed.] From the beginning to nearly the end of his time in the Cellular Jail – in 1911, 1913, 1917 and 1920 – Savarkar kept sending petitions to the British government begging for clemency and promising loyalty and cooperation in return. [In 2002, the Port Blair airport was named after Savarkar by India's Hindu nationalist government and a sound-and-light show for visitors at the Cellular Jail revolves around Savarkar, to the exclusion of the countless martyrs who suffered and died there because they did not renounce their beliefs and pledge loyalty to the Raj. Ed.]*

There are a number of arresting photographs of Netaji visiting the Cellular Jail in end-December 1943 to pay homage to the martyrs for India's freedom. Shortly after the proclamation of the Azad Hind Government in Singapore on 21 October 1943, the Greater East Asia Conference was held in Tokyo on 5–6 November. Netaji attended the summit – where he gave a memorable address – along with other Asian leaders such as Dr Ba Maw of Burma, Jose P. Laurel of the Philippines, and Prince Wan Waithayakon of Thailand. At the summit, Prime Minister Hideki Tojo of Japan announced that Japan would cede the Andaman and Nicobar Islands – under Japanese control since March 1942 – to the Provisional Government of Free India. This was the context for Netaji's visit to the Andamans in end-December 1943.

Renaming the Andaman Islands as Shaheed in honour of the several generations of martyrs brought there since the first war of independence in 1857–58, and the Nicobar Islands as Swaraj in anticipation of India's imminent freedom, Netaji declared: 'Like the Bastille in Paris, which was liberated first, setting free political prisoners, the Andamans, where our patriots suffered much, is the first to be liberated in India's fight for independence.' He was anticipating the Indian National Army's imminent push from Burma into India's northeast, where many episodes of valour and martyrdom indeed unfolded in 1944.





Netaji at the infamous Cellular Jail on the Andaman Islands, December 1943

The green expanse of the Gymkhana maidan in Port Blair stands as a witness to history. It was on this maidan [*now Netaji Stadium, ed.*] that Netaji personally raised the Indian tricolour on 30 December 1943. The lovely wooden structure of the colonial-era Andaman Club stands on the maidan. A stage was prepared in front of the clubhouse. Netaji spoke from that stage for ninety minutes in elegant Hindustani. We met a number of Port Blair residents who were present on the occasion and remember that historic speech. Netaji appointed Major General Arcot Doraiswamy (A. D.) Loganathan of the INA as the Governor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. General Loganathan served in that position until October 1944, when he returned to the INA forward headquarters in Rangoon.



Netaji addresses a rally at Port Blair's Gymkhana Maidan (now Netaji Stadium) on 30 December 1943. The national tricolour hoisted by him is in the foreground. The colonial Andaman Club is in the background.

We were most surprised to find only three of the seven wings of the Cellular Jail still standing. The other four wings have been demolished since independence! This strikes me as thoughtless, wanton erasure of history. The macabre prison of the British Empire represents glorious heritage for us Indians, which should have been



carefully preserved. I was reminded of the poet Byron's sonnet 'The Prisoner of Chillon':

Eternal Spirit of the chainless Mind!  
Brightest in dungeons, Liberty! Thou art,  
For there thy habitation is the heart –  
The heart which love of thee alone can bind;  
And when thy sons to fetters are consign'd –  
To fetters, and the damp vault's dayless gloom,  
Their country conquers with their martyrdom,  
And Freedom's fame finds wings on every wind.  
Chillon! Thy prison is a holy place,  
And thy sad floor an altar – for 'twas trod,  
Until his very steps have left a trace  
Worn, as if thy cold pavement were a sod,  
By Bonnivard! – May none those marks efface!  
For they appeal from tyranny to God.

We found that a small, modern hospital has been built on part of the space cleared by demolishing much of the old prison. A hospital is very welcome but it could easily have been built somewhere else. The hospital is named after Govind Ballabh Pant, a Congress leader from the United Provinces (Uttar Pradesh) during the freedom struggle and Uttar Pradesh's chief minister after independence. The naming too is peculiar – Pant had no connection with the Andamans and was certainly never an inmate of the Cellular Jail.

It became clear to us that what remains of the Cellular Jail needs to be declared a national memorial as a matter of urgency. [*In 1979, ten years after Sisir and Krishna's visit, the Cellular Jail was declared a national memorial by the then prime minister, Morarji Desai. Ed.*]

Still, our tour of the Cellular Jail was a lesson in history. We were shown around by an enthusiastic young security guard. He showed us the hanging platform where three captives would be executed simultaneously, side by side. The jail superintendent and a doctor would be present along with the hangman. The floor of the platform would slide to one side once the hanging was done and the bodies would drop into a cavern below the platform. The corpses would then be taken out through a tunnel and disposed of. Encouraged by our interest, the young man then produced a noose, made of very thick rope, used during the British times. One of our group tried it out around his own neck. It was all very macabre, but chillingly real. I was told that an area close to the hanging platform is still used as a prison,



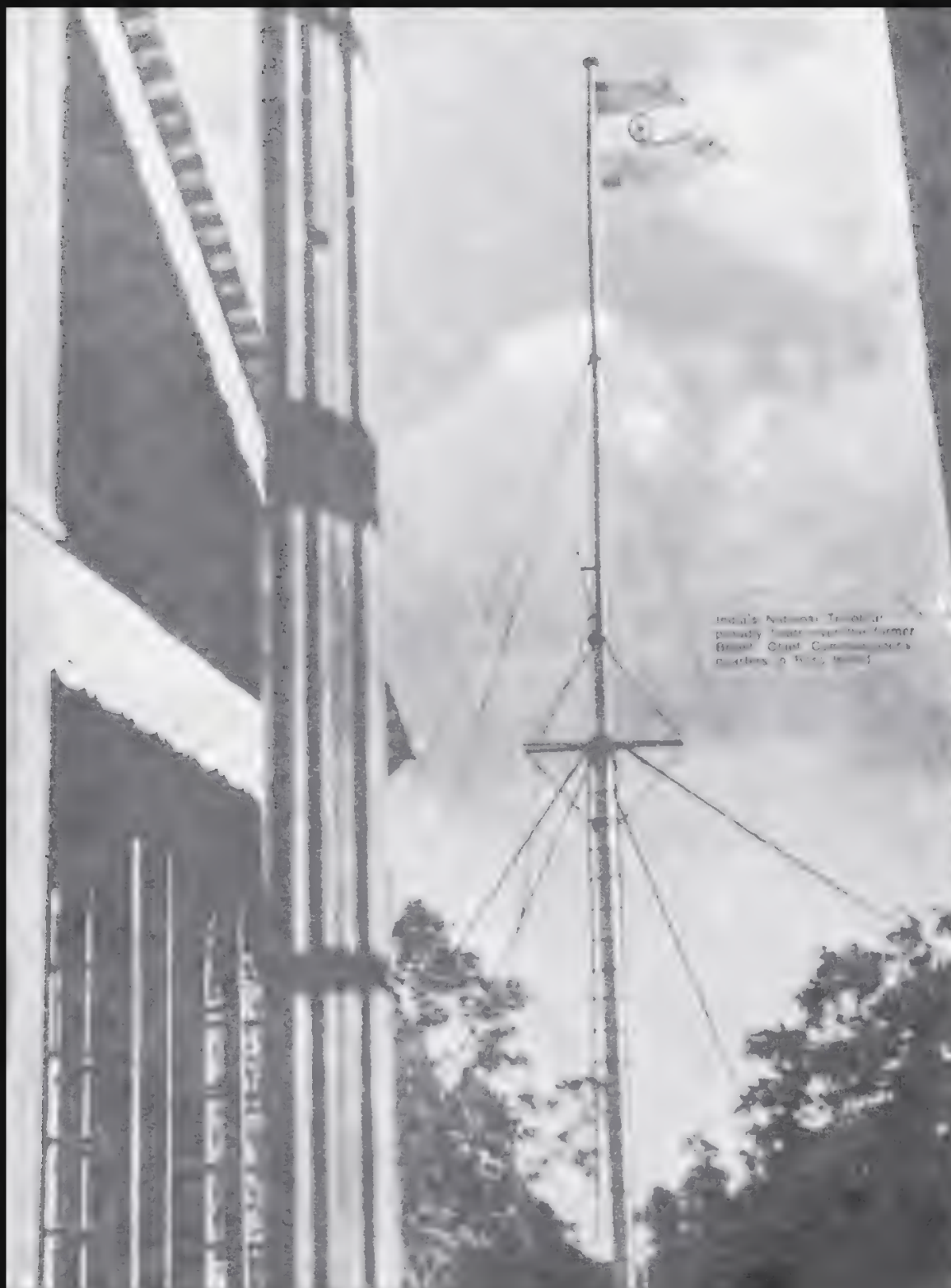
and another area close by as a ward for mentally ill women.

We ascended the staircase to the upper floors. A silent corridor lay before us lined with tiny cells, each with iron bars. Inside the cells it feels dank and a bit cold, despite the tropical climate. I asked our young guide how long he had been in the Andamans. He replied that he was born on the Andamans – his father had been brought here as a prisoner after being convicted of murder. The Andamans indeed have a reputation as a 'land of convicts', as many non-political prisoners transported here settled permanently after their release. The present reality however is that in contrast to the rest of India, there is hardly any crime on these islands!

After the rally in the Gymkhana maidan, Netaji took a speedboat from the Aberdeen jetty to Ross Island, about two miles east of Port Blair. Ross Island is a historic place. It was the headquarters of the British administration of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands from 1858 onwards. It has a lovely Gothic church, a lighthouse, a British-era military barracks, and the British chief commissioner's residence – a beautiful wooden villa with intricately carved walls. Netaji stayed in this villa during his trip. He was deeply moved when he saw the tricolour fluttering over the villa. In typical English colonial style, the villa has a huge ballroom on the ground floor. It was in this ballroom that Netaji hosted a dinner for his accompanying officers and eminent local citizens.

To our dismay, we found that while the structure of the house is intact, its wooden doors and windows have been stripped and taken away and the same thing has started happening to the wooden walls. Ross Island is now under the jurisdiction of the Indian Navy. The colonial chief commissioner's residence, where Netaji stayed, should be preserved as a heritage structure open to the public and visitors to the Andamans. Alternatively, it can be used as a residence for senior Navy officers, which would help save it and keep it in good order. *[On 30 December 2018, in commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of Netaji's visit to the Andamans, the Government of India renamed Ross Island as Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Island. Ed.]*





The national tricolour flutters proudly above the departed British chief commissioner's bungalow on Ross Island (now Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Island) in the Andamans. Netaji stayed in this residence in end-December 1943.

When the Japanese landed and took over the Andamans in March 1942, they freed the remaining prisoners in the Cellular Jail and imprisoned the British officials and jailers there instead. It was poetic justice. But then the small Japanese military garrison on the islands developed a paranoia about spies. We heard that two Japanese ships carrying foodstuffs were sunk by British planes off the



Andamans, and the Japanese suspected that someone operating radio transmitters on the islands had alerted the British about the impending arrival of the ships. In a clumsy effort to root out spies, the Japanese arrested, imprisoned and even killed a number of locals. Such treatment of Indians was unheard of anywhere else in the Japanese-controlled countries of Southeast Asia: Burma, Malaya, Singapore, as well as Indo-China, Indonesia and Thailand.

By the time the Azad Hind administration under Gen. Loganathan assumed charge at the end of 1943, relations between the Japanese and the locals had soured significantly. But the arrival and presence of the Azad Hind officials came as a relief to the population. Locals who lived through that time told us that the Japanese did some good as well – they upgraded the airstrip, built a network of roads, and taught the people terraced farming. The locals grew sweet potatoes on those terraces carved from hillsides. This alleviated the wartime food shortage, and the islanders continued the practice thereafter. The Japanese obsession with spies may have had something to do with the fact that they had had their own spy network on the islands before their arrival. A Japanese couple had arrived in Port Blair five years before the war in Asia began in December 1941 and set up a successful photography shop in the main bazaar. They were a popular, well-liked couple. When they were eventually revealed to be spies, the man smiled and said: 'You are five years too late.'

There is one segment of the Andamans population who remember neither the Japanese nor the British. These are the tens of thousands of Partition refugees from East Bengal who have been re-settled in the Andaman Islands in the past twenty years. My parents' families are from East Bengal, and I was keen to see this new Andamanese community. *[From 1949 onwards until the 1960s, at least 4,000 refugee families from East Bengal who had come to West Bengal were re-settled in the Andamans, mostly during the 1950s. In 1951, there were only 2,363 Bengali-speaking people in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. In 1991, that number was 64,706. Bengali has for several decades been the single-most spoken language in the very multilingual Andamans. Nearly thirty percent of the 400,000 Andaman residents today speak Bengali as their mother tongue. The Andamanese Bengalis are almost all of namasudra background, from a 'low-caste' group known as 'Matua'. Ed.]*

We set out to visit the Bengali villages of the south Andamans. We drove through scenic roads with coconut groves on either side, or else farming fields. Occasionally we passed rubber plantations, the milk-coloured rubber oozing from the trees. There are busy plywood factories. Elephants were at work alongside the humans and their machines, carrying and neatly depositing the huge trunks of felled trees for the workers. It was a picture of a peaceful and relatively prosperous rural



society. I was so glad to see that these unfortunate people uprooted from East Bengal and facing a destitute existence in West Bengal have found a new lease of life on the Andaman Islands. Some villages have schools for the children. In one village, we had quite a surprise. The school's elderly headmaster turned out to have been a classmate of Netaji's fifty years ago at Calcutta's Scottish Church College! All the villages had already heard about the Netaji exhibition in Port Blair. They were thrilled and said in their East Bengali dialect: '*Deikhya ashum giya!*' (We will go and see it!)

On our last evening, we took a motorboat ride in the seas off Port Blair. It was a full-moon night and the moon, which looked like a gold plate in the dark sky, illuminated the shimmering waters with a silvery hue. I suddenly remembered Dorothy Wordsworth's line: 'The moon shone like herrings in the water.' A ship called *Yerawa* was stationary nearby, its deck and cabins ablaze with light. A little further the *State of Bombay*, a ship that plies to Calcutta, was anchored at the Chatham island's jetty.

During our trip, we tried to locate the exact spots where the famous photos of Netaji during his December 1943 visit were taken. Some were easy enough. One taken just inside the gate of the Cellular Jail shows him in right profile, looking at the grim building. A part of the building's ground and first floors are visible in the background, and on the left side of the near background there is a young, healthy-looking tree in full bloom. We found the spot easily, except that the young tree of twenty-five years ago is unrecognizable, having grown to a huge size!



Netaji inside the Cellular Jail, December 1943





Looking Towards India. Subhas Chandra Bose gazes towards India from the Andamans shoreline close to Port Blair, December 1943. Ross Island is visible in the right background.

The spot of another photograph had eluded us. This shows Netaji in left profile, gazing in the direction of India from somewhere on the shoreline off Port Blair.



There is an upright coconut tree to his right, and his booted right foot rests on the base of another coconut tree, this one not upright but tilted away from him at an angle. The sea takes up most of the background, but Ross Island is clearly visible on the right side of the background. The photo, acquired like so many others by Netaji Research Bureau, has a caption: 'Looking Towards India'.

We scoured the Gymkhana maidan and the Aberdeen jetty but couldn't find the spot with the tilted coconut tree anywhere, to our frustration. Finally, on that moonlit boat ride, we spotted the sharply angled coconut tree – at a point on the shoreline below the Cellular Jail – from where Subhas Chandra Bose looked towards India.

### **Notes**

*Nearly three and a half decades after this first visit in 1969, Krishna Bose revisited the Andamans, Port Blair and the Cellular Jail in 2003. Then a third-term Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) from West Bengal and the chair of the parliamentary standing committee on external affairs (1999–2004), she led a delegation of parliamentarians on an inspection and tour of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Ed.*



Netaji and Women

In War and Friendship



## WAR: THE RANI OF JHANSI REGIMENT

In the mid-nineteenth century, a young Indian queen famously declared: '*Meri Jhansi nahin doongi!*' (I will not give up my Jhansi!) It was an era when far more powerful rulers of Indian kingdoms had meekly capitulated to the rapacious East India Company and cravenly accepted British rule. Rani Lakshmibai was forced to give up her Jhansi, but her spirit of resistance was unbowed. Once the great Indian rebellion of 1857 broke out, she reclaimed her kingdom. She then fought the British tenaciously for several months in 1858 – first defending Jhansi and then Gwalior – personally leading her forces on horseback in the field, sword in hand and a pistol in her belt. On 17 June 1858, she was martyred in combat at Gwalior. She was twenty-nine, and became perhaps the most famous martyr of what came to be known as the first war of Indian independence.

Eighty-five summers later, a historic event took place in Singapore. On 12 July 1943, a force of women soldiers came into existence in Singapore to fight in the last war of Indian independence led by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. In the entire history of World War II, there is no other example of such a force, led by and composed of women. Even today, women participating in actual combat is very rare anywhere in the world, and all-women military units are practically unheard of. The Indian National Army's women's regiment was named the Rani of Jhansi Regiment by the INA's Supreme Commander, Netaji. Quite literally, a thousand Ranis were born in the footsteps of Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi.



The first parade of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, Singapore, 12 July 1943

On 12 July 1943, twenty-four women, still dressed in saris but carrying .303 Lee-Enfield rifles fixed with bayonets that they had been trained to handle by male INA



officers, presented a ceremonial guard of honour to Netaji in Singapore. Netaji told them: 'I am convinced that unless and until Indian women play their due part in the national struggle, India cannot hope to be free. If anyone thinks it is unwomanly to shoulder a rifle, I ask them to turn the pages of history. What did the brave Rani of Jhansi do in the Revolution of 1857, India's First War of Independence? We have to continue and complete the work of the Great Rani. Therefore, in the last and final War of Independence, we want not one but thousands of Ranis of Jhansi.'

By a happy coincidence, the woman who became the Rani of Jhansi Regiment's commander was also called Lakshmi. She was Lakshmi Swaminathan, twenty-eight, a doctor from Madras specializing in gynaecology and obstetrics who had been living and working in Singapore since 1940. Lakshmi – later Lakshmi Sahgal after her post-war marriage to the INA hero Colonel Prem Kumar Sahgal – was personally asked by Netaji to organize and lead the regiment. A striking-looking and superbly intelligent woman from an upper-class south Indian family, Lakshmi cut a dashing figure in INA uniform and was a perfect role model for the regiment's recruits, many of whom were still in their teens, as it grew rapidly in size.



Captain Lakshmi Swaminathan leading the Ranis

Janaki Thevar (later Janaki Athi Nahappan after marriage) became the deputy commander. Janaki, just eighteen, was from an affluent family of Kuala Lumpur – her parents were immigrants from south India. When Netaji came to speak at Kuala Lumpur's Padang (maidan), Janaki bicycled to the rally without telling her parents. When Netaji called for volunteers and donations, she went up to the stage, took off her gold necklace and earrings and handed them over to him. She then tried to hide from her parents so they would not notice the missing ornaments, but the next morning the local newspaper carried a frontpage photograph of her handing over the jewellery to Netaji. Lakshmi then visited their house and Janaki and one of her sisters signed up for the Regiment and left home to train in Singapore. Absolutely



dedicated and of iron character even at that age, Janaki Thevar soon emerged as the perfect second-in-command to Lakshmi Swaminathan.



Netaji reviews the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, Singapore, 1943. Lieutenant Janaki Thevar, the Regiment's eighteen-year-old deputy commander, is in the foreground.

The bulk of the hundreds of Rani recruits who were trained in Singapore were from poor families of Tamil labourers of south Indian (and sometimes Sri Lankan) origin on the Malayan rubber plantations. Many of the Malayan recruits were Christian. A few months later, once the INA forward headquarters was established in Rangoon and Netaji himself moved there in January 1944, many girls and young women from middle-class families of Indian (especially Bengali) origin living in Burma also joined the Regiment; some recruits also came from Indian families living in Thailand. By 1944, the Rani of Jhansi Regiment consisted of about 1,500 fully trained soldiers. *[Lakshmi passed away at her home in Kanpur in 2012, at ninety-seven, and Janaki passed away in Kuala Lumpur at eighty-nine in 2014. Both had highly distinguished public careers but regarded their two years in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment as the life-defining highlight of their time on earth. Both were closely connected with the activities and programmes of Netaji Research Bureau for decades and came to Netaji Bhawan in Kolkata often, particularly on Netaji's birth anniversary, 23 January. Ed.]*

The formation of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment was no spur-of-the-moment decision for Netaji. From at least the late 1920s onwards, he was a proponent of the equal and active participation of women in the freedom struggle – he even tried to get his political mentor Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das's wife, Basanti Debi, to lead the nationalist movement in Bengal after Deshbandhu passed away prematurely in June 1925 – and the conviction only grew stronger with time. There was also the example of young Bengali women such as Pritilata Waddedar and Bina Das who took on the Raj's power in the early 1930s as members of Bengal's armed



revolutionary groups, who looked up to Subhas Bose as an inspirational figure. Lakshmi has told me many times that it is difficult to fully grasp what a big feminist Netaji was. During the perilous three-month submarine journey from Europe to East Asia in the middle of World War II (February–May 1943), Netaji was planning to form an INA women's regiment on his arrival in southeast Asia. The submarine journey began from the port of Kiel in northern Germany on 9 February, and just before daybreak on 28 April, Netaji was transferred near Madagascar in a rubber dinghy from the German U-boat (U-180) to a waiting Japanese submarine (I-29), which brought him to Sumatra on 13 May.

During this epic voyage, Netaji was accompanied by Abid Hasan, the young man from Hyderabad who had come to Germany well before the war to study engineering and had worked closely with Netaji from soon after his arrival in Berlin in April 1941. Netaji discussed his plan for a women's regiment with Abid Hasan during the submarine journey and asked his opinion on whether Indian women might be reluctant to trade their saris for uniforms.

During the later part of the journey in the German U-boat, somewhere off the western coastline of Africa, Netaji was dictating to Abid Hasan the speech he intended to give upon the formation of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. Netaji usually spoke extempore but sometimes, for particularly important occasions, he did prepare a text in advance though he never carried it on his person when delivering the speech. He would typically tear up the text and throw it away after studying it. Suddenly the U-boat's commander, Werner Musenberg, spotted a British warship through his periscope and ordered his crew to torpedo it. As the torpedoes were being readied, a sailor made a momentary mistake with some equipment and the U-boat rose up and surfaced! The British ship came charging towards the U-boat. Commander Musenberg called out 'Dive, dive!' and the U-boat barely managed to disappear underwater and get away, but not before the enemy ship rammed its upper deck's railing and made it keel over partially.

Abid Hasan was frozen with fear when he suddenly heard Netaji speaking to him in a tone of mild reprimand: 'Hasan, I just repeated the same point twice.' Still shaking, Abid Hasan then resumed taking notes. He recalled to me more than three decades later, while staying at our home in Calcutta in 1976, that at that moment Netaji was saying that Indian women had always preferred to die with honour than live in dishonour. But what was needed of them at this time was not mass suicide as in the distant historical past but confronting the enemy on the battlefield armed, as the Rani of Jhansi had done. *[U-180, the vehicle of the epic journey, sank an 8,000-tonne British oil-tanker called Corbis on 18 April 1943, when Netaji was on board. Abid Hasan recounted this incident as well to Krishna Bose in 1976. He said it was a*



*remarkable sight – it was as if the sea was ablaze after the torpedoes hit the oil tanker. Ed.]*

Netaji arrived in Singapore on 2 July 1943 and on the 4th he accepted the leadership of the Indian Independence League in East and Southeast Asia from the veteran revolutionary Rash Behari Bose. On 5 July, Netaji reviewed an impressively organized parade of 15,000 INA soldiers on Singapore's seaside Padang and delivered a rousing address. At a huge and charged 60,000-strong assembly of Indians and people of Indian origin at the Padang on 9 July, Netaji called for 'total mobilization' in the final war for India's freedom. This concept of mobilization involved the participation of women along with men in all roles in the struggle, especially his plan for the formation of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment.

The Indian Independence League had active branches across the countries of Southeast Asia which had come under Japanese occupation, and was particularly strong in Malaya and Singapore. Lakshmi was greatly helped in setting up the Rani of Jhansi Regiment by Attavar Yellappa, the young president of the Indian Independence League in Singapore. Yellappa, born in 1912 in a village in the Mangalore region of present-day coastal Karnataka, was an exceptional organizer, and a pillar of the Azad Hind movement under Netaji's leadership from 1943 to 1945; he was especially good at fundraising for the movement. After qualifying as a barrister in London, A. Yellappa had moved to Singapore to work for a law firm. He moved to Rangoon in 1944, where he established the Azad Hind Bank to support the struggle, and was tragically martyred in Burma in June 1945 after being wounded in a rural area in an enemy air raid. He had just turned thirty-three, and was overseeing INA supplies before his death. Lakshmi was with him until very shortly before his death. *[Mr Yellappa's birth centenary in 2012 was celebrated with great pride by people in his native Mangalore region. Ed.]*

The Indian Independence League in Singapore had a women's organization. Yellappa first had a discussion about the proposed Regiment with Mrs Chidambaram, the head of this women's wing, and Dr Lakshmi Swaminathan. He then helped Lakshmi organize the first guard-of-honour event for Netaji at very short notice on 12 July. Lakshmi recalls how heavy the .303 Lee-Enfield rifles felt as they drilled furiously to prepare for the event. In his speech at this event – where a large number of women were present in addition to the first Ranis – Netaji urged the women soldiers of the INA to emulate two warriors in history: Rani Lakshmibai of India and Joan of Arc of France. The number of Rani recruits increased to fifty within days and kept rising.





Netaji addresses a women's meeting in Singapore, 1943. Lakshmi Swaminathan is standing to his left. Gandhiji's picture and the Congress flag are in the background.

Yellappa then arranged a barracks in Singapore where 300 Ranis could be accommodated and trained. Eventually, 600 Ranis were trained at this camp. Netaji formally inaugurated the camp on 22 October 1943. A day earlier, 21 October, he had proclaimed the Provisional Government of Azad Hind and Lakshmi Swaminathan had become minister for women's organization in its war cabinet. [*The main building of the Singapore Management University, SMU, stands today on the site of the Ranis' barracks. They trained on the grounds of the present-day Singapore Art Museum, in the same Bras Basah district of downtown Singapore. Ed.*]

Netaji individually interviewed all the INA officers assigned to train the women. He told them there was to be no scolding during the training, and the instructors must regard the women as their sisters. Lakshmi says that Netaji was remarkably successful in inculcating the ethic of gender equality and respect in the INA's male soldiers. During the difficult times in Burma that lay ahead – and especially the final months in 1945 – the INA men and women were thrown together and worked seamlessly in absolute comradeship, without a single untoward incident.

Although there was no specific instruction, it was learned that Netaji wanted the Ranis to wear khaki uniforms, and not saris. By the autumn of 1943, the saris had been replaced by a very smart uniform: jodhpur breeches with tucked-in bush shirts and black buckled shoes. The cap was the same as the slightly jaunty one worn by the INA's male soldiers. It was also learned that Netaji felt that long hair would be inconvenient for their role. The most famous photograph of Netaji inspecting the Ranis along with Captain Lakshmi shows a very smart line-up of rifle-bearing women who look completely professional and battle-ready, clad in uniform and with hair cut to or above the shoulder. The language of the girls' training was Hindustani, but written in the Roman script. Though most of the girls were of south



Indian (mostly Tamil-speaking) origin, they adapted very quickly.

Netaji faced a great deal of opposition from the Japanese when the Rani of Jhansi Regiment was formed. Yellappa had formed a reception committee for Netaji's arrival in Singapore at the beginning of July. The Japanese objected when Yellappa wanted to include women in the committee, but he did not relent. When the Japanese heard about the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, they – and particularly the senior military officers – were amazed and aghast. They considered women soldiers an absurd proposition, and their training a waste of ammunition. Once the Rani of Jhansi Regiment got off the ground, curious Japanese officers would sometimes turn up at the Singapore camp's firing range to watch them at target practice. They reluctantly conceded that the Ranis were shaping up rather well at shooting, and even bayonet charging.



Netaji reviews the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, flanked by Captain Lakshmi Swaminathan, the Regiment's commander. Singapore, October 1943.

In early 1944, as the INA prepared to advance into India, the Rani of Jhansi Regiment girls sent a memorandum to Netaji, written in their own blood. They asked to be sent to the front as soon as possible. The INA's Shah Nawaz Khan has said that Netaji had a particular wish – that the Rani of Jhansi Regiment would be in the vanguard when the INA entered Calcutta. Calcutta was still far off, but two large groups of Ranis came forward to Rangoon, in March 1944 and June 1944. The girls made the arduous journey from Singapore partly by railway and partly on foot while carrying their weapons and backpacks. Most of the girls belonged to combat units, and some to a nursing unit. A camp was established in Rangoon, and another was set up more than 400 miles north in the hill town of Maymyo [*now known as Pyin Oo Lwin, ed.*] close to Mandalay, where an INA advance base hospital was operating. Lakshmi took charge of the Maymyo base and Lieutenant Janaki Thevar, aged nineteen, assumed command in Rangoon.



The Rangoon camp bustled with activity. Nearly a thousand Ranis were there, as recruits from Burma were trained and inducted, and many more were waiting to be trained. The girls experimented with food and devised a nutritious form of 'dry rations' for the INA soldiers at the front. Netaji was pleased with the initiative. He had taken to eating only what the soldiers ate. The girls also took on some of the Japanese practices such as having tea with salt rather than sugar, and eating a raw substance that kept the beriberi disease at bay.

The girls contributed significantly to the movement's media operations. They would regularly do radio broadcasts from Rangoon. On 22 February 1944, an ailing Kasturba Gandhi died in British detention in Poona (Pune), aged seventy-four. She had been imprisoned since the Quit India uprising in August 1942. When Kasturba died, Netaji delivered a special radio address. He then asked Lakshmi and Manawati Pandey (later Manawati Arya), a recruit from Burma, to make radio speeches in Kasturba Gandhi's honour. As they were speaking on the radio, there was a massive air raid on Rangoon. They read out their speeches unperturbed as the bombing went on.

By April 1944, INA soldiers wounded in the fighting in India's northeast were being brought to the Maymyo hospital for treatment. Lakshmi was leading and supervising the Rani nursing unit deployed there. In end-April, Netaji came to Maymyo to see the wounded soldiers. On 30 April, the Ranis put on a cultural show for fresh troops departing for the front, which was followed by a farewell dinner hosted by Netaji the next evening. The night of 1 May had bright moonlight and a major air raid completely destroyed the Ranis' barracks – a school building. The girls took shelter in trenches just in time and there were no casualties except for a girl called Lily who was late in evacuating the targeted barracks and was injured when a wooden beam fell on her head; Lakshmi and Manawati managed to extricate her. Netaji and his staff officers arrived as soon as the bombing ended and the Ranis moved to another school building less exposed to aerial attack.

The diary of General Masakazu Kawabe, the commander of Japan's Burma Area Army in 1943–44, records a meeting he had with Netaji in Maymyo on 22 June 1944. During that meeting, Netaji pressed him repeatedly for transport so he could send a Rani unit to the Manipur front. This was impractical and indeed impossible by that point in time. The Imphal offensive had stalled, and the British and Americans had complete dominance of the skies. The Japanese and INA forces already at the front could hardly be supported and re-supplied through the terrain of hilly jungles, and the torrential monsoon had added to the supply crisis and greatly increased the incidence of diseases among the frontline troops. On 10 July 1944, the order was given to INA troops to retreat back into Burma. It was a bitter



disappointment for the Ranis not to be able to fight on Indian soil – most of them had never been to India [*Abid Hasan has described a walk he took just outside Rangoon with Janaki Thevar sometime in 1944. They sat on a hillock and Abid asked her if the countryside reminded her of India. Janaki replied: 'I don't know. I have never been to India.'* Ed.]

On 21 October 1944, the first anniversary of the proclamation of the Azad Hind Government in Singapore was observed in Rangoon with various ceremonies and a military parade. Many INA units were lined up in formation and Netaji was taking the salute from the podium. Just as the Rani of Jhansi Regiment was marching past the podium, enemy warplanes appeared in the sky. The Japanese and Burmese officers jumped off the podium and ran, and the large crowd of spectators started to flee. Netaji and the senior INA officers stayed put on the podium, and the Ranis calmly continued their march-past. One of the planes dived steeply towards the ground to strafe with its machine guns, and at that moment INA anti-aircraft guns opened up. A fragment from an AA shell hit one of the marching Ranis on the head, decapitating her. At that point, Netaji agreed to step down from the podium and a 'disperse' order was given.

The mettle of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment was severely tested during the withdrawal from Burma in late April of 1945, under almost incessant aerial attack as the British land forces approached Rangoon.

On 20 April 1945, General Kimura, the commander of Japan's Burma Area Army, departed from Rangoon. The Japanese requested Netaji to also leave Rangoon immediately. By 23 April, the fall of Rangoon looked dangerously imminent. But Netaji was adamant that he would not leave Rangoon before the Rani of Jhansi Regiment was safely evacuated from the city. So Mr S. A. Ayer, minister of publicity and propaganda in the Azad Hind Government, was conferring on what to do with Teruo Hachiya, Japan's ambassador to the Azad Hind Government, who in turn was conferring with Major General Saburo Isoda, the Japanese liaison officer with the INA. The initial plan was that the Ranis would be evacuated from Rangoon by train and then Netaji would leave the city by car. But after waiting for a long time at the railway station, the Ranis were told there was no space for such a large contingent on a train. Netaji was furious when he heard about this.

Eventually, Netaji left the city on 24 April, on the same day as the Ranis who had come to Burma a year or more earlier from Singapore. Most had their homes in Malaya. General Isoda was able to organize fifteen lorries and several cars and the withdrawal from Rangoon to Bangkok began. The Japanese army was implementing a scorched-earth policy as it retreated, burning anything that could be of value to the enemy. Netaji's convoy consisted of a number of his senior civilian



colleagues and high-ranking INA officers, and several hundred Rani of Jhansi Regiment soldiers. Battle-hardened veterans of the INA First Division, which had fought in India in 1944, escorted the convoy. Netaji put Major General Mohammad Zaman Kiani, the commander of the First Division, in overall charge of the withdrawal. *[Netaji left Major General A. D. Loganathan in command of 6,000 INA troops – mostly of the Second Division which had arrived in Burma from Singapore by autumn 1944 – who remained behind in Rangoon. These troops under General Loganathan and his deputy, Col. Raja Mohammad Arshad, maintained order in the city and protected its Indian population until the arrival of the British forces in the first week of May. Ed.]*

The convoy had to first travel to the town of Pegu *[now known as Bago, ed.]* north-east of Rangoon before turning back southeast in the direction of the Thai border. This was a touch-and-go situation because the British forces were speedily advancing on Pegu from the north. *[The convoy got through, barring one mishap when a rear group of the Rani contingent, which apparently made part of the Rangoon-Pegu journey on a train, was fired on by Burmese elements who had turned against the Japanese since late March. Major Lakshmi Shankar Mishra, who had been decorated by Netaji for his success in leading an INA detachment in the Arakans in early 1944, was escorting the Ranis and was killed, along with two Ranis named Stella and Josephine, both from Malaya. Josephine, who was of Sri Lankan origin, had apparently joined the Rani of Jhansi Regiment while her husband joined the INA. Ed.]*

Janaki Thevar, the twenty-year-old commanding officer of the Ranis, kept a diary during the perilous retreat. The girls marched with their rifles and heavy backpacks. The sky buzzed constantly with enemy warplanes, bombing and strafing. The Ranis had to repeatedly leap off the lorries and take cover during the attacks. Sometimes they took rest in abandoned houses in villages along the route, and at other times they simply rested under trees. During these rest stops, rice was boiled and dal cooked to keep everyone going. Janaki has written that Netaji was always calm during the air attacks even as others got nervous – he simply went on shaving on one occasion, and smoking a cigarette on another.

On 26 April, the convoy had a long wait at the ferry-crossing of the Wau river. Netaji got impatient at the delay as an air raid could happen at any time. When the ferry arrived, there was clearly not enough space for the large contingent of Ranis. But Netaji brusquely refused Isoda's request to go across; he wanted all the Ranis across first. Eventually he directed the Ranis to wade across the river to the other side. Hoisting their guns above their heads, the girls did so, assisted by Colonel Shaukat Malik and Major N. G. Swami.

The same story repeated itself at the crossing of the Sittang river on 27 April. This was a bigger and much deeper river. The girls tied ropes around their waists



and, already up to their necks in water without their feet touching the bottom, were pulled across to the other bank by the escorting soldiers. Yet the girls' morale stayed sky-high. S. A. Ayer has written that they crossed the Sittang 'amidst great excitement and a lot of giggling from the Ranis'.

After crossing the Sittang, the convoy had almost no transport left – just one lorry and Netaji's car. All the other fourteen lorries, and the cars, had broken down from mechanical failure or got stuck in mud, or else had to be abandoned at the ferry crossings. From then on, the journey continued on foot.

Janaki has written that Netaji refused entreaties from his officers and colleagues to travel by the car, which was coming along without any passengers. He walked. During a rest stop on 29 April, Janaki asked Netaji to take off his military boots so he could put his feet up, and give her his socks for a wash. It was then discovered that Netaji's feet were covered in blisters. But he still refused to get in the car and insisted on walking with everyone else, brushing aside entreaties by General Isoda. During the night of 29–30 April, the column covered fifteen miles on foot, and finally arrived in the town of Moulmein on 1 May 1945. At Moulmein, Netaji gave a short speech to everyone, in which he especially praised the courage and endurance of the Ranis.

From Moulmein [*now Mawlamyine, ed.*], there was a train service running to Bangkok. On arrival in Moulmein, Janaki Thevar wrote in her diary, '... everyone rested except Netaji. He spent the whole day arranging food and accommodation [for everyone]. Tonight, he arranged for all the girls to be sent by train from Moulmein to Bangkok. We are packed like sardines, but it's better than marching in the mud. After covering about twenty miles, we stopped around 1 a.m. The bridge has been blown up by American bombers. We had to march ten miles to the next station, marching all night.'

Colonel Shaukat Malik, who was accompanying the girls, managed to get hold of a few bullock carts to put their heavy backpacks, which made marching a lot easier. Then they waited for an onward train. On the evening of 3 May, they got on a train again and after a start-stop journey with several train changes, they reached Bangkok on 7 May 1945. Netaji had arrived in Bangkok on 6 May and he organized food, fresh clothes and accommodation for the girls, and made arrangements for their onward journey to Malaya and Singapore. [*Mohammad Zaman Kiani has written in his memoir, which was not yet available when Krishna Bose wrote this article in 1976, that 'on the road to Moulmein, some of the senior officers, including Major Generals J. K. Bhonsle and A. C. Chatterji, started to complain that they had blisters on their feet and were finding it difficult to march.' Netaji then put them in the one remaining lorry and sent them ahead, while he walked along with everyone else. Kiani*



also records the crossing of the Gulf of Martaban, 'an expanse of water over a dozen miles across to Moulmein'. Here the ferry service was adequate, though they were lucky not to be attacked from the air as they crossed to Moulmein. Kiani further writes that the Sittang ferry point was protected by an INA anti-aircraft battery but after crossing that river, Netaji's ADC Lieutenant Nazir Khan was killed by an air strike. Ed.]

I wish some top-rated artist of our country would create a memorable painting of this gruelling march: of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose resting under a tree, surrounded by Bhonsle, Kiani, Chatterji, Ayer, Malik and Swami, while Major Menon, a doctor, tends to his blistered feet and the girls of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment gather around.

On 12 August 1945, Lieutenant Janaki Thevar reported to Netaji at his Singapore residence. [Netaji had returned to Singapore, the birthplace of the INA and the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, after spending a few weeks in Bangkok. Ed.] Netaji placed his right hand on her head in the traditional gesture of blessing. Janaki invited him to a play the Ranis were performing on the evening of 14 August. The play was about the Rani of Jhansi's heroism and martyrdom in the first war of independence in 1857–58. P. N. Oak, General Bhonsle's ADC, had written the play.

After the atomic attacks on Hiroshima (6 August) and Nagasaki (9 August), Japan's capitulation had become inevitable and was imminent. From 12 August onwards – until the morning of 16 August – Netaji was engaged in almost non-stop discussions with his top civilian and military colleagues at his Meyer Road residence on the next course of action for the Provisional Government of Azad Hind in the radically changed circumstances. How should the INA and the IIL respond to the end of the war and the British re-occupation of Singapore and Malaya? What should Netaji himself do? In the midst of these hectic consultations, Netaji made time to keep Janaki's invitation and attend the performance, though on the 14th he was slightly indisposed – he had a dental problem and had a tooth extracted on the day. He was running a little late and told S. A. Ayer to inform the Ranis to not wait for him to arrive but to start the play.

Netaji arrived at the venue soon after the performance began, to a massive ovation. The audience was huge. About 3,000 INA personnel consisting of officers and ordinary soldiers were present [the latter mostly from the INA's Third Division, recruited from civilian volunteers in Malaya and Singapore, ed.], and hundreds of Indian and Indian-origin residents of Singapore were also there. Netaji watched the play enacted by the Ranis in his usual attentive style.

At the conclusion of the performance, the entire gathering rose and sang in unison 'Subh Sukh Chain Ki' – the anthem since 1943 of the Provisional Government of Free India, a Hindustani variant of 'Jana Gana Mana' and with an almost identical



tune.

## Notes

*On the occasion of Netaji's birth anniversary on 23 January 1979, the Netaji Research Bureau, led by Dr Sisir Bose, organized a convention of veterans of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment at Netaji Bhawan, Kolkata. The convention was attended by Lakshmi Sahgal (Swaminathan), Janaki Athi Nahappan (Thevar) – who came from Kanpur and Kuala Lumpur, respectively – and scores of members of the Regiment from across India and abroad. Lakshmi Sahgal delivered the convention's keynote. In the speech, she said: 'Netaji brought a purpose and a sense of identity to our lives. It is one of the tragedies of India's youth that since Independence, they have had no inspired leadership or idealism.' Ed.*



FRIENDSHIP: JANE DHARAMVIR, HEDY FULOP-MILLER, NAOMI VETTER,  
KITTY KURTI

Some of Subhas Chandra Bose's warmest but little-known friendships were with women from Europe. These women not only befriended the foreigner from a distant land. They made his mission – India's freedom – part of their own lives and supported him in that struggle. This article is about four such women: Jane Dharamvir, Hedy Fulop-Miller, Naomi Vetter and Kitty Kurti.

Netaji met Jane Dharamvir in 1921, towards the end of his nearly two years in England (1919–1921), during which he completed the Tripos at Cambridge and qualified for the Indian Civil Service (ICS). He was unhappy during his time in England. He felt his lowly status as a colonial subject of the British Empire keenly, and although he did very well in the ICS examination, placing fourth, his heart was not in it. After much reflection and soul-searching, he decided to quit his ICS appointment in April 1921 and two months later, in June, he set sail for India, having resolved to join the Indian national movement for independence. The rest, of course, is history.

But before he left the shores of England, the young Subhas, then twenty-four, spent a few days in the Lancashire home of Dr and Mrs N. R. Dharamvir in the company of his close friend Dilip Kumar Roy. Dilip Kumar Roy (1897–1980), a musician and mystic, was born on 22 January 1897, one day before Netaji's birth on 23 January 1897. He was the son of Dwijendralal Roy (1863–1913), a renowned poet, playwright and musician who composed several famous and evergreen songs of Bengali patriotic music in his later years.

Dr N. R. Dharamvir, a Punjabi physician, was a staunch patriot and a friend of Lala Lajpat Rai. [*The Bose family mansion, from where Netaji's historic escape from India happened in January 1941, is at Kolkata's 38/2 Elgin Road. It has been Netaji Bhawan since 1946 and the home of Netaji Research Bureau since 1957. Named after Lord Elgin, viceroy of India in 1862–63, it was renamed Lala Lajpat Rai Sarani after independence in honour of the renowned nationalist from the Punjab who was beaten to death at the age of sixty-three by the British police in Lahore in 1928. Ed.*]

Dr Dharamvir's wife, Jane, was English but of Russian origin. The young Subhas was completely floored by this cultured and elegant woman, and deeply moved by the warmth and affection with which she treated him. According to Dilip Kumar Roy, meeting Jane Dharamvir in 1921 was the beginning of a complete change in Subhas's stiff attitude towards women in general and European women in particular.



In his early youth, Subhas Chandra Bose was shy and uncomfortable around women. In Dilip Kumar Roy's words, he was 'awkward and shy and ill at ease vis-à-vis women'. Moreover, he had a distinct puritanical streak and tried to persuade his friends to shun the company of women. Dilip Kumar Roy did not appreciate this aspect of his friend's character and resisted Subhas's attempts to restrain him from interacting with women. Rather ironically, in England women were sometimes drawn to Subhas precisely because he was 'so good and unapproachable', Dilip Kumar Roy has written. This made him even more uneasy and he walled himself off from women.

Another contemporary of Subhas's was Qazi Abdul Wadud (1894–1970), who was his fellow student at Calcutta's Presidency College and later became a well-known writer of Bengal. In a beautiful poetic tribute to Netaji, he has written that already in the Presidency College [*from where Netaji was expelled in 1916 for allegedly assaulting a British professor, Edward Farley Oaten, who had misbehaved with Indian students, ed.*] days, Subhas was imbued with patriotism and love for his enslaved country, and resolved to lead a life of personal sacrifice like a fakir for India's sake. Wadud writes that he was filled with respect for Subhas's patriotism, but did not particularly like his monkish side. Wadud writes that having already experienced the sweetness and innocence of young women, he found it difficult to regard them as some sort of obstacle or distraction to be avoided.

When Netaji visited the Dharamvirs in Lancashire, he had just become a household name in India because of his decision to reject the career of a servant of the Raj. An ICS appointment was considered gold dust and his resignation letter – written from Cambridge on 22 April 1921 and addressed to E. S. Montagu, the secretary of state of India – had caused quite a sensation. Netaji's own parents – especially his mother Prabhavati – were initially quite upset by his decision.

Dr Dharamvir, however, was delighted to meet and host this unusual young man and was proud that he had rejected becoming a subservient enforcer of British rule in India. Occasionally, during the visit, the doctor would make unkind remarks about the English in the presence of his English wife. Dilip Kumar Roy noticed that though such remarks were entirely in line with his friend's strong anti-British sentiments, Subhas would try to change the conversation when this happened.

The day they left the Dharamvirs' home in Lancashire, Subhas put on his raincoat for the journey and noticed a bulge in one of the pockets. He opened it and saw it was a packet of food Jane had prepared for their journey. The Dharamvirs saw them off at the local station and waited on the platform until the train left.



16. Herbert Street,  
Cambridge.  
22.4.21.

The Right Hon. E. S. Montagu M.P.,  
Secretary of State for India.

Sir,

119/11  
62/87

I desire to have my name removed from the list of probationers in the Indian Civil Service.

I may state in this connection that I was selected as a result of an open competitive examination held in August, 1920.

I have received an allowance of £100 (one hundred pounds only) up till now. I shall remit the amount to the India Office as soon as my resignation is accepted.



I have the honour to be,  
Sir,

Your most obedient servant,

Subhas Chandra Bose.

Subhas's letter of resignation from the Indian Civil Service, April 1921

As the train pulled out, Mrs Dharamvir threw another two packets through the window. The packets contained fruit and chocolates. Dilip Kumar Roy has written that tears came to Subhas's eyes. He said to Dilip: 'Women will always be women.'

Because of his shyness and reticence with women, Subhas had not been able to tell Mrs Dharamvir how touched he had been by her kindness. He made up for it by writing her a long letter from the ship to India in June 1921. The ship swayed as he wrote and so the handwriting is a little uneven. But the emotions are unmistakable.



He frankly said that his twenty-month sojourn in England had not been a happy one, except for the few days he spent at the Dharamvir home: 'I was genuinely happy during my short stay.'



Netaji with Mrs Dharamvir (his 'Didi') in Dalhousie, 1937

He told her that no one else in England had been so affectionate towards him, no one had bothered about whether he had eaten properly or not, and no one else had said to him 'a penny for your thoughts' when he was pensive. He addressed her as



'Didi' (older sister in Bengali) and ended with 'respectful pranams'. From then on, Subhas Chandra Bose always referred to Jane Dharamvir as his dear 'Didi'. She became one of the women he held in high esteem, alongside his political mentor Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das's wife Basanti Debi (whom he called 'Ma') and his sister-in-law Bivabati, the wife of his older brother Sarat Chandra Bose.

The short stay in Lancashire was the beginning of a lifelong friendship between the Dharamvirs and Subhas Chandra Bose. In April 1937, Netaji was released after a year of imprisonment. His health was not good and he went to recuperate at the Dharamvirs' summer home in the hill resort of Dalhousie in the Punjab (present-day Himachal Pradesh). This time, he stayed with them not for a few days but for several months.

It was a very happy and relaxing time for Netaji. They ate a lot of mangoes over the summer, sent by the Dharamvirs' daughter Sita from Lucknow. Dr Dharamvir had decided that eating *khormuj* (muskmelon) was good for health and made everyone, including Subhas, consume copious quantities of that fruit too. On a train ride from Pathankot, Mrs Dharamvir's pet cat suddenly got agitated by the train's rattling and shaking and they had a hard time pacifying the feline.





Netaji in Dalhousie (1937) with Mrs Dharamvir and her daughter, Leila Dharamvir



In 1937–38, Subhas Chandra Bose played a most unusual role – that of a match-maker! The Dharamvirs' daughter Sita, who had qualified as a doctor, had become close to a fellow physician – a Bengali, Dr Santosh Sen. Netaji asked Dr Sen very gently if he could do anything to facilitate their relationship. The following year, he wrote to Mrs Dharamvir requesting her consent for their marriage. [*Sisir Kumar Bose has written in his memoir Subhas and Sarat: An Intimate Memoir of the Bose Brothers: 'About a year before the sojourn in Dalhousie, one of the Dharamvirs' daughters, Sita Dharamvir, stayed with us for some time while doing a post-graduate medical course in Calcutta.' During Sita's stay at 1 Woodburn Park, Sarat Bose's house, which is a two-minute walk from Netaji Bhawan, 'we had the chance to meet her mother and were completely charmed'. Ed.]*



Netaji in Dalhousie, 1937. Mrs Dharamvir, cradling her cat, is behind his left shoulder.

In mid-January 1941, Subhas Chandra Bose left India, never to return. A few days before Sisir drove him out of 38/2 Elgin Road on the night of 16–17 January on the first leg of his famous escape from India, Netaji wrote a letter to Mrs Dharamvir. The letter itself is fairly unremarkable – he wrote that he was expecting to be arrested and imprisoned again soon. Netaji deliberately wrote some letters of this nature on the eve of the escape to friends and acquaintances to deceive the British government and police, because he knew all his letters were being opened and perused.

But I think that in Jane Dharamvir's case, it was also his way of saying goodbye to his 'Didi' before he embarked on a perilous journey to secure India's freedom. She clearly remained very special to him all his life.

\*

In February 1933, Subhas Chandra Bose left India for Europe. He would spend almost all of the next three years in Europe – until March 1936 – except for one brief



trip to India in December 1934, permitted by the British colonial government after his father Janakinath Bose passed away in Calcutta. During his three years in Europe, Netaji worked tirelessly as a roving ambassador for India's freedom struggle. He visited numerous European countries – west and east, north and south. He addressed public meetings, established contacts with the intelligentsias of these countries, and built personal relationships with top leaders – among them Eamon de Valera of Ireland, Edvard Benes of Czechoslovakia, and Mussolini of Italy.

The reason Bose went to Europe in early 1933 was that his health had deteriorated severely after two years of imprisonment in a succession of jails in India. Eventually, the British government gave him permission to go to Europe for medical treatment. When he boarded the ship in Bombay in February 1933, he was on a stretcher, and was taken off an ambulance at the port. He disembarked in Italy and made his way to Vienna, a city known then for its world-leading doctors and excellent medical facilities. In Vienna, he did have major surgery for a gall bladder problem – but two years later, in 1935. His health improved once he arrived in Europe, and he benefited over the next few years from sojourns in the Czech spa resort of Karlovy Vary and the Austrian spa resort, Bad Gastein. It was certainly a welcome, much-needed and revitalizing change for him.

Dilip Kumar Roy had given Subhas a letter of introduction to a friend of his: Hedy Fulop-Miller. Hedy Fulop-Miller was Hungarian, from Budapest, but lived in Vienna. She was a famous opera singer in Europe. Hedy had married Rene Fulop-Miller, a writer whose mother was Serbian, but the marriage did not work out and they divorced.

Hedy and Subhas soon struck up a friendship. Hedy was very well-connected in Viennese society. She helped the young Indian freedom fighter to settle into his life of enforced exile in Vienna – a city which had been the capital of the Habsburg Empire for centuries and latterly the centre of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1918 – and which became Netaji's favourite place in Europe, followed by Prague. It was in Vienna in June 1934 that Netaji met his future wife, Emilie Schenkl. Hedy Fulop-Miller introduced him to many influential people in Vienna, in the academic, cultural and political worlds. She was very taken with Subhas and used adjectives like *wunderbar* (wonderful) and *fabelhaft* (fabulous) to describe him.





Netaji in Budapest, 1934. Hedy Fulop-Miller is standing next to him.

Hedy also helped look after Subhas during and after his surgery for his gall bladder ailment in 1935, along with Emilie and other friends. At the time, a gall bladder operation was a major procedure and it was performed by Professor Demel, one of Vienna's top surgeons. Netaji was asked to make a will before the operation and he wrote on a piece of paper: 'My love to my countrymen, my liabilities to my Mejdada' (his older brother Sarat Chandra Bose, who was his closest confidant and comrade in the struggle for India's freedom).

When Netaji returned to Europe for a couple of months towards the end of 1937 – just before he assumed the presidency of the Indian National Congress in January 1938 – he spent a lot of his time in Bad Gastein, the spa village in Salzburg province which was a favourite of his and Emilie's. Hedy visited them there. There are lovely photographs of Netaji in snowy Bad Gastein around Christmas 1937, taken by A. K. Chettiar, a visiting Indian photographer and film-maker. They show Netaji with Emilie, Hedy Fulop-Miller and A. C. N. Nambiar, who would become Netaji's chief associate in Berlin during World War II.



Netaji in Bad Gastein, Austria, December 1937. From left, A. C. N. Nambiar, Hedy



Meanwhile, towards the end of 1936, Hedy Fulop-Miller had come to India. In Calcutta, she stayed for several weeks at 1 Woodburn Park, Sarat Bose's residence. A very friendly person, she became close to Sarat Bose's family. Sisir, my future husband, was sixteen and met her for the first time then. Hedy liked to wear saris and loved Indian food. Netaji, quite ill, was then jailed and under treatment at the Calcutta Medical College Hospital. Hedy was able to visit him there with special permission from the British authorities. During her stay in Calcutta, Hedy gave an opera recital on the Calcutta station of All India Radio. It was a sensation – people in India had never heard European opera singing of such a high standard.

Hedy Fulop-Miller was deeply drawn to Indian philosophy, music and culture. She went to Sri Aurobindo's ashram in Pondicherry during her trip to India. Aurobindo was impressed by her singing talent and gave her an Indian name: Nee-lima.

Sarat, Bivabati and Sisir next met Hedy in Vienna in November 1948, when they visited the city as part of an extensive tour of European countries. They found that one side of the large living room of her apartment, located in the Soviet occupation zone of the post-war city, was set up and decorated in Indian style. [*Sarat, Bivabati and Sisir also met Professor Demel, who had operated on Netaji in 1935. The surgeon was a gifted violinist and treated them to an impromptu violin recital in his home. He also proudly showed them a treasured gift – an autographed copy of Netaji's book, The Indian Struggle, which was published in 1935. It was during this visit that Sarat, Bivabati and Sisir met Emilie Schenkl for the first time. Emilie and Netaji's little daughter, Anita, turned six during the visit, on 29 November 1948. Ed.*] Subsequently, Sisir met Hedy many times when he was undertaking advanced training in paediatrics in Vienna in 1950.

My chance to meet Hedy Fulop-Miller came in December 1959. Sisir and I got married in December 1955, and from September 1958 we lived for fifteen months in Boston, in the United States, where Sisir trained in paediatric radiology on a Rockefeller Fellowship at the Harvard Medical School and the Boston children's hospital. On the way home to India at the end of 1959, we stopped off in Europe and visited Vienna and a few other cities: Paris, Munich and Rome.

We spent Christmas in Vienna with Aunt Emilie and Anita, then seventeen. We called on Hedy at her apartment and spent several hours with her. By that time, she was getting elderly but was still very elegant. I noticed how tastefully her apartment was furnished and decorated, and remember the care and finesse with which she served tea.



Hedy Fulop-Miller struck me as a fascinating, highly sophisticated woman – with interests spanning politics, art, philosophy and mysticism, and of course music. But there was also something enigmatic, even slightly mysterious, about her. I sensed some sort of emptiness in her personal life. Sisir told me that when she visited Calcutta in 1936, she had wanted to adopt Sisir's youngest brother, who was four at the time.

Hedy told us that at the end of the war, when the Red Army took over her part of Vienna, she lost many valuables as well as personal papers including all the letters she had received from Netaji. She was only able to save a few paintings she owned.

Sisir and I next went to Europe a decade later, in 1971. It was a research trip over six very hectic weeks. We visited England (mainly London), East and West Germany (both parts of divided Berlin, Bonn, Hamburg, Heidelberg and Wiesbaden), Czechoslovakia (Prague, also Karlovy Vary), and Switzerland (Zurich). We participated in conferences on Netaji, dug through archives and unearthed valuable materials on his activities in Europe, and had long discussions with many people including A. C. N. Nambiar (in Zurich) and Alexander Werth (in Germany) who had worked closely with Netaji in Europe. We even met Professor Oaten, of the Presidency College incident of 1916, at his home near London. [*This trip resulted in Krishna Bose's first book, Itihaser Sandhane, 'In Search of History', which was published in December 1972. It is the seminal work on Netaji in Europe, and simultaneously historiography and a wonderfully readable travelogue of Europe, East and West, as it existed in 1971. Regrettably, the Bengali book was not published in an English version, as it should have been. Ed.*]

But of course, we also went to Vienna, the Austrian capital, to see Aunt Emilie and spend a few days with her.

It was September 1971. We had intended to call on Frau Hedy Fulop-Miller during our stay in Vienna. We learned that she had passed away just two months earlier. One of Subhas Chandra Bose's most supportive friends in Europe was no more.



By the time Netaji left Europe for India at the end of March 1936, he regarded Vienna as a city where he had many dear friends. In a letter from the Dharamvirs' in Dalhousie in 1937 to a friend in Vienna, he enquired after them and asked for news of Vienna. He mentioned that he had received letters from Fraulein Schenkl, that Frau Fulop-Miller had recently visited India and met him in hospital in Calcutta, and that Frau Vetter had written to him that Jews in Vienna were increasingly frightened by the growth of the Nazis there. [*In March 1938, the German military*



marched into Austria and at a triumphant rally in Vienna, Hitler proclaimed the Anschluss, the end of Austria's sovereignty and its incorporation into the Third Reich. Hitler himself was of course originally from Austria, and many other notorious Nazi leaders were also Austrian. Ed.]

Hotel de France  
31. 5 33

Dear Mrs Vetter,

I am enclosing a copy of my speech for this afternoon. I shall of course speak extempore and not read the speech. But the enclosed note will give you some idea of what I shall speak — so that you will not have any difficulty in translating it into German at once.

Thanking you,  
Yours very truly  
Subhas C. Bose

Mrs M. Vetter

Netaji's letter to Naomi Vetter, 1933

Frau Vetter was Naomi Vetter, who along with her husband had become dear friends of Netaji's and helped him generously since his arrival there in 1933. At many public meetings in Vienna, Naomi Vetter assisted Netaji as an interpreter. Netaji always spoke without notes, but sometimes he would prepare a rough text and send it to Mrs Vetter in advance so she could interpret easily.

Mrs Vetter was also involved with the formation of the Austrian-Indian Association, a friendship society. When the association's draft constitution was prepared, Netaji gave it to Naomi and asked her to look through it carefully. Mrs Vetter would regularly write articles about the Indian independence movement in Austrian newspapers and magazines. Moreover, she had many contacts in other European cities and when Netaji travelled to places like Berlin and Paris, he carried letters of introduction from Mrs Vetter.

Once, when Netaji arrived at his hotel in Berlin, he found that Mrs Vetter had phoned the hotel before his arrival and arranged for flowers to be placed in his room. He reciprocated by sending her Indian mangoes whenever he received a shipment from India.

Whenever Netaji was away from Vienna, he would correspond with Mrs Vetter and keep her apprised of his activities. He wrote to her about his meetings with Indian students in Rome and Milan, and told her what Mussolini had said to him in Rome. After his gall bladder surgery in Vienna in 1935, he wrote to her from Karlovy



Vary, the Czech spa resort where he had gone to convalesce, to tell her that he had enjoyed a good night's sleep after a long time.

Hotel de France, Vienna  
28.5.33

Dear Mrs Vetter,

A friend of mine brought me some  
mangoes from India. May I have the pleasure of  
offering a couple of mangoes for Dr Vetter and yourself?  
I regret I had some more to send.  
As you know, the mango is an Indian  
fruit and one of our best fruits. I am sure that  
this variety is really sweet.  
Best regards for yourself and  
Dr Vetter.

Yours sincerely  
Sukh Chandra

From Naomi C Vetter -

Netaji's letter to Naomi Vetter, 1933

Netaji deeply appreciated Mrs Vetter's help and support. He wrote to her: 'Grateful that you are interested in my country. I am dedicated to my country.'

When Sisir and I met Naomi Vetter in Vienna in December 1959, I instantly liked her. She had a sweet, motherly personality, and I felt that had Netaji met her a few years earlier than he did, he would definitely have turned her into a mother figure! Naomi told us that when the Red Army took Vienna in 1945, she fled the city. When she returned to her apartment, she found that almost all her possessions had been looted, but her letters from Netaji and other papers were intact.



My dear Mrs. Vetter,

Through our common friends I have kept myself informed about you. Owing to the conditions under which I have been living ~~here~~, it was not possible at first to get into touch with you. Afterwards, I heard of the terrible bereavement which overtook you. As there was a possibility of my going to Vienna, I decided not to write to you but to meet you personally when I was there. Unfortunately, when I arrived there, you were away. As I do not know if I shall be coming to Vienna in the near future, I am writing this letter. First of all, let me convey my sincerest condolence to you on your saddest bereavement. Since I had the privilege of knowing President Vetter so intimately and since I respected and admired him so much, I can appreciate the loss that you have suffered. In these hard times, may God give you strength to put up with all the trials that you are having to face.

There is much that I would like to talk to you about, if I could meet you. For that purpose a letter is not a suitable medium. Please let me know your present address, as well as your future movements so that I may look out for the possibility of meeting you personally.

Before I conclude, I should like to thank you once again from the bottom of my heart for all the kindness I have received at your hands in the past.

Assuring you of my deepest esteem,

I am, yours ever sincerely,

*Subhas Chandra Bose*

P.S. Please address me on the cover as O. MAZZOTTA.

*1943*

Netaji's letter to Naomi Vetter in Vienna after his arrival in Berlin in 1941. In the handwritten P.S., he asks her to address her reply to O. Mazzotta, his Italian pseudonym.

One of those letters had been sent to her by Netaji in April 1941, immediately after his secret arrival in Berlin. He had signed the typewritten letter as 'Subhas Chandra Bose' but added a handwritten P. S. in which he asked her to address her reply to 'O. Mazzotta' – Orlando Mazzotta, the Italian pseudonym under which he had travelled in disguise from Kabul to Berlin via the Soviet Union. She gave this letter along with others to us for the collections of Netaji Research Bureau, and it is displayed in the Europe Room of the Netaji Museum at 38/2 Elgin Road.



We found that Mrs Vetter still had a lively interest in India. She was especially interested in India's politics, and was keen to know our views on how the country was progressing a decade after independence. At one point, she said with a touch of regret that she no longer received invitations to events at the Indian embassy in Vienna. We were embarrassed to hear this. Subhas Chandra Bose had written to Naomi Vetter in 1936: 'How can I thank you sufficiently for your kindness? People have wondered why I have spent so much of my time in Vienna during the last three years – but I do not wonder.'

\*

Kitty Kurti first saw Subhas Chandra Bose walking on the Kurfurstendamm, a famous avenue in Berlin. This was in May or June of 1933, shortly after his arrival in Europe in March. She remembers that 'he was clad in a dark [Indian-style] suit, not unlike a priest's', and 'wore a small, cream-coloured Gandhi cap' on his head. [*Sisir Kumar Bose has written in his memoir Subhas and Sarat: 'Uncle had very definite views on how he would dress in Europe in the 1930s. He decided to dress in Indian attire for public meetings and receptions and when he met important people. He chose a long achkan-style dark coat worn with European-style trousers, a Kashmiri cap and laced shoes. He is seen in that outfit in many of his photographs in Europe. He did make exceptions and would occasionally appear in public in well-cut Western suits.'* In a photograph of Netaji addressing a meeting in Berlin in August 1933, at which Kitty Kurti was probably present, he is seen in this achkan outfit but indeed with a light-coloured Congress cap on his head. Ed.]

Kitty Kurti was struck by the dignified bearing and 'strikingly intelligent face' of the stranger who walked by her on the street. She realized he was Indian and thought he must be 'a mystic, a spiritual man', or perhaps a philosopher. When she was invited along with her husband Alexander to hear him speak at a public meeting in Berlin a few weeks later, she was surprised to find out that he was in fact a political leader, an anti-colonial revolutionary.





Subhas Chandra Bose addressing a public meeting in Berlin, August 1933. This may have been the occasion on which Kitty Kurti personally met Netaji for the first time.

Kitty Kurti was from Prague, the capital of the new country of Czechoslovakia established after World War I. She and Alexander (Alex), an engineer by profession, had moved to Berlin in August 1932 after getting married. To her horror, Hitler came to power in Germany six months after their arrival.

She was filled with foreboding. Hitler was from Austria, a country she knew well from going to university in Vienna: 'Though born and brought up in Czechoslovakia, I had studied in Vienna. I knew the Austrian mentality thoroughly – the narrow, prejudiced mind of the petit bourgeoisie and the incredible intolerance of its youth. I knew the Austrian neurosis. There was both great light and deep shadow there: great culture and finesse, exquisite taste, as well as an unbelievable rottenness. For had not Austria given Mozart to the world, the infinite joy and bliss of his music? And had not Austria given birth to Hitler?' [*From a Slavic country, Kitty probably encountered both Austrian prejudice and a sense of superiority. Until 1918, the Czech lands had for centuries been part of the Habsburg Empire, centred on Vienna. Ed.*]

Netaji's arrival in Europe in March 1933 coincided with the Nazis' coming to power in Germany. She met him in Berlin a few months after that. She was in an upset state of mind. Kitty viewed the Nazis as 'loathsome' and 'repugnant', and Hitler as a 'fiend'. She could not walk the streets in Berlin without coming across black-clad SS men and brown-shirted SA stormtroopers, their 'faces like big beef'. To make matters worse, the newspaper she read every morning, the *Berliner Tageblatt*, changed its liberal line and became a pro-Nazi daily. Her new Indian acquaintance was a welcome distraction from the distress she was feeling. Fascinated in particular by 'his Buddha-like smile', she invited him to lunch at her home.

The lunch table was set in the Kurtis' apartment when 'Mr Bose' arrived. Kitty



was not sure what he would like, but had prepared a meal of fluffy rice, vegetables and some lean meat. She was relieved to find that Mr Bose was not a vegetarian. She served tea rather than wine – the essential accompaniment to any meal in continental Europe – because she had guessed, correctly, that he did not drink alcohol. *[This was indeed the case at the time, but Netaji did drink wine and liqueurs later, especially during his time in Europe during World War II. He also smoked heavily during his time in Southeast Asia from 1943 to 1945. Ed.]* She, Alex and the guest tucked into the lunch.

It was a sunny summer day and Mrs Kurti enquired if Mr Bose had taken advantage of the weather and gone for a morning walk. Mr Bose replied that he had not had the time to do so, because he had had a meeting with Hermann Goering – the top Nazi – that morning. In fact, he had come to the Kurtis' apartment straight from Goering's office.

Kitty was aghast. Why did he want to hobnob with 'Satan's representatives on earth', she asked him. An argument of sorts ensued at the dining table. Mr Bose told them that he was willing to seek support for India's freedom struggle from any quarter. He said: 'It is dreadful. [But] India and its people have been starved, degraded, exploited. This cannot go on forever. Have you any idea, Mr and Mrs Kurti, of the despair, the misery and the humiliation of India? Can you even imagine her suffering and indignation? British imperialism there can be just as intolerable as your Nazism here, I assure you.'

That argumentative lunch was the beginning of a deep friendship between Kitty Kurti and Subhas Chandra Bose. As the Nazis entrenched their power in Germany, Netaji became more and more concerned about the Kurtis' welfare, safety and future. He took to constantly advising them to leave Germany, whenever he came to Berlin and met them. Kitty did want to leave as soon as possible, but Alex wanted to stay in Berlin. In a letter to Mrs Kurti sent from Vienna on 22 December 1935, he wrote as a postscript: 'P.S. I often wonder why you stay in Berlin. Don't you find the atmosphere suffocating?'



% American Express Company,

Vienna

22. 12. 35

Dear Mrs Kurti,  
I was very glad to receive your kind letter of the 27th October and later on, the article on R. R. I am sorry for the delay in replying to your letter. I have also neglected to order for a copy of my book for you. Please pardon me for it. Today I am writing to my publishers and I hope that within a week you will get it.

I agree with you about the trust in the younger generation. In India, also, the fight is going on between the old and the young. Often I find that the young are hampered by the old and a bitter conflict takes place. But we shall come out victorious.

It is possible that I may come to Berlin in January. I am now planning to go home in February. In case you come nearer to this place - please let me know. Perhaps we could. For instance, one could easily travel to Bratislava from here.

With kindest regards to Dr. Kurti.

and yourself,

P.S.

I often wonder why you stay in Berlin. Don't you find the atmosphere suffocating?

I am

Very sincerely yours,

Satish C. Bose

Netaji's letter to Kitty Kurti, 1935

The Kurtis saw the wisdom of his advice and at first thought to go back to Czechoslovakia, to Prague. But Netaji advised them against it. He foresaw the war in Europe and German aggression against much smaller neighbouring countries. He was right - the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia between autumn 1938 and spring 1939 and conducted a brutal reign of terror during World War II in the Czech lands in particular. He advised them to emigrate to the United States. That is what the Kurtis did, sometime around end-1937 or 1938, and they built a new life there.



C/o Dr N. R. Dharmavir,  
Dalhousie,  
Punjab, 3.6.37

Dear Mrs Kurti,

I am sorry I have not written to you so long and have not replied to the letter you wrote many months ago. You have heard by now of my release in March. As my health is not satisfactory, I have come here for a long rest and change of climate. I shall stay here for some months. This is a hill-station in the north-west of India about 2000 metres high.

Please write to me all about yourself and Mr Kurti. What are your plans for the future? When do you go to Orissa? Have you any plans there? Did you go to Zurich to meet Jung?

Are you quite sure that Annette is R R's present wife?

Please write to me about your impressions of Freud's family. I am now expecting a long, long letter from you. I have not much to write myself.

Netaji's letter to Kitty Kurti, 1937

After Netaji left Europe for India at the end of March 1936, he and Kitty Kurti did not meet again. But they corresponded regularly. On 25 July 1936, he wrote her a long letter from home internment in his brother Sarat's bungalow in Kurseong, near Darjeeling. Towards the end of 1936 he was moved – still in detention – to the Calcutta Medical College Hospital and wrote her another long letter from there on 5 January 1937. He wrote her yet again from Calcutta on 17 March 1937.

Kitty and Subhas shared a deep interest in modern European psychoanalysis, particularly the ideas of Sigmund Freud and the work of Freud's protégé turned



rival, Carl Jung. This formed a major subject of their correspondence. [*Sisir Bose writes in Subhas and Sarat that when he stayed with his detained uncle for a few weeks at the Kurseong bungalow during the monsoon season in 1936, Netaji would frequently use psychoanalysis to evaluate various members of the extended Bose family, as well as some of his colleagues in the independence movement. Ed.*] He wrote to her at least twice from the Dharamvirs' house in Dalhousie in the summer of 1937 – on 3 June and then again on 10 July.

Kitty had shared happy tidings that she and Alex were expecting a child – their second. She had also been sending him her poems written in German, which he tried to understand with the aid of a dictionary. In the July 1937 letter, he wrote: 'When do you go to America? I hope you will continue correspondence even when you are there.' In the same letter, he wrote: 'Here in India, our work progresses slowly. We have a very difficult task in front of us, but we are hopeful and optimistic. Of course, we realise that England will not easily give us what we want.'

On 23 January 1966, Netaji's sixty-ninth birth anniversary, a deeply poignant book by Kitty Kurti on her friendship with India's Netaji was published from Calcutta: *Subhas Chandra Bose As I Knew Him* (Firma KL Mukhopadhyay, 1966). Sisir wrote a brief foreword to the slim volume, which is a profoundly illuminating personal insight into Subhas Chandra Bose by a central European woman who met him almost by accident in 1930s Europe. Five years later, in January 1971, Mrs Kurti came to Calcutta from the United States at the invitation of Netaji Research Bureau and delivered the Bureau's annual 'Netaji Oration' on 23 January at Netaji Bhawan on her friendship with Netaji.

Kitty Kurti's 1966 book on Subhas Chandra Bose ends like this:

'Where are you now, my friend? ... Whatever did happen, whatever may be the case – greetings to you, my brother. May this letter find you in peace, whether in this world or the other.'

## Notes

*When Sisir and Krishna Bose visited Prague in September 1971, they spent a day with Kitty Kurti's family, who still lived in the city. They especially enjoyed meeting Kitty's elderly but very lively mother. Sisir and Krishna last saw Kitty and Alexander Kurti at their home in Connecticut in the northeastern United States in May 1981. Although ageing by then, the Kurtis were just as hospitable as they had been to Subhas Chandra Bose nearly five decades earlier. Ed.*

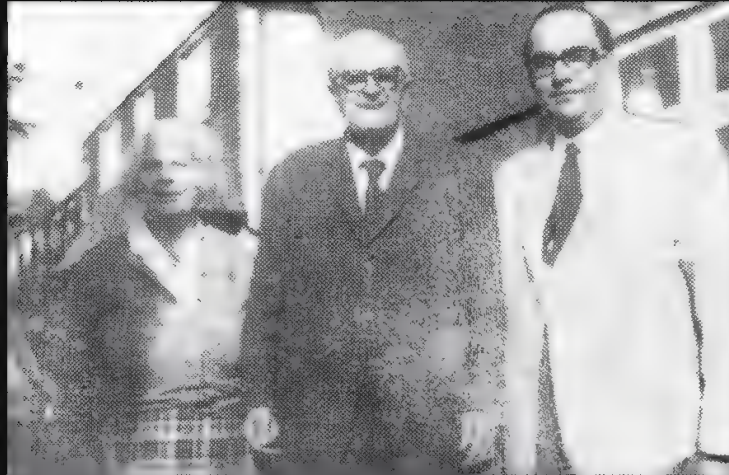


# Requiem



## MEETING PROFESSOR EDWARD FARLEY OATEN

'Is Presidency College still the premier college of Bengal?' That was the first question Professor Edward Farley Oaten asked when my husband Sisir and I met him at his house in Walton-on-Thames, just south of London, on the last day of September 1971.



Dr Sisir Kumar Bose with Professor Edward Farley Oaten and Mrs Oaten at their home in Walton-on-Thames, just south of London, on 30 September 1971.

Photograph by Krishna Bose.

It was quite an experience to meet the eighty-seven-year-old, who as a young professor of Presidency College acquired unique notoriety in 1916 when Subhas Chandra Bose was expelled from the College for allegedly assaulting him. From that incident a new verb came to be born in Indian English – to 'oatenize' someone and thence the noun 'oatenization'.

From the late 1960s, assaults on academics – and occasionally even murder – have become commonplace in colleges and universities in Calcutta and West Bengal. But in 1916, it was a singularly dramatic incident. Particularly so because it involved a British professor on one side and Indian students on the other. The incident retrospectively acquired historic importance because it marked a turning point in the life of a future leader of India. The young Subhas Bose, just turned nineteen, who was his class's representative on the College's students' consultative committee, was expelled from Presidency and rusticated from Calcutta University due to the Oaten affair.

In his autobiography, Subhas Chandra Bose wrote about the significance of the 1916 incident for his life and remarked – 'My Principal had expelled me, but he had made my future career. I had a foretaste of leadership – though in a very restricted sphere – and of the martyrdom that it involves. In short, I acquired character and



could face the future with equanimity.'

I was excited at the prospect of meeting Professor Oaten, fiftyfive years later. Only when the train pulled out of London's Waterloo station did I realize that in my excitement, I had forgotten the bouquet of flowers I had meant to give him. We passed through Wimbledon, Vauxhall and a few more stops and in a little over half an hour the train pulled in at a quiet station. This was Walton-on-Thames. Mrs Oaten was waiting at the station for us with her car. A short drive later, we spotted the professor waiting for us at his garden gate, holding his large dog on a leash.

Sisir and I had come to interview him. But initially it was he who asked us a barrage of questions, starting with the query about Presidency College. 'I am hungry for news of Calcutta,' he said. Is College Square much changed, he wanted to know. Had there been any Muslim vice chancellor of Calcutta University in recent times? He recalled his good friend Hasan Suhrawardy, who had been the first such VC. Who was the Director of Public Instruction (DPI) now? Professor Oaten had held that post at one time. His daughter had been born in Darjeeling when he was the DPI of undivided Bengal. Any woman DPI yet?

When I told him that girls were often doing better in higher education now than boys – I myself taught English at a leading Calcutta women's college – he said that he had always held the opinion that Bengali girls, or Indian girls for that matter, were highly intelligent and just needed opportunity. He did not, however, know that Presidency College admitted girl students. 'Since when?' he asked in astonishment. He recalled Scottish Church College too. After two years of agonizing uncertainty, young Subhas was admitted to the Scottish Church College by Principal Urquhart, and resumed his studies. How is Scottish Church College doing now – that too was a good college in my time, he enquired.

I felt somewhat uneasy when he asked me about the general state of education in Calcutta and West Bengal. Given the near collapse of our higher education system, it was neither easy nor pleasant to answer. He then pulled out a book from the bookshelves and showed me the picture on the cover. It was the old Senate House of Calcutta University with its graceful columns. The picture aroused nostalgic memories in me. 'Is it still like this?' the professor asked. Alas, the building was not there any longer, I had to tell him. He was very sorry. He wondered why it could not be preserved. Nowadays, it is usual to preserve the exterior of well-known period buildings, even if the interior is completely changed and modernized. Perhaps the demolition of the old Senate House was in a way symbolic of the fall of Calcutta University as an institution, I told him.

Professor Oaten had known many prominent Calcuttans of the 1920s. He asked me about some of them – what their sons had gone on to do and whether the



daughters had married well. I answered as best as I could. 'What was your maiden name?' he suddenly asked. 'Maybe I knew your father too,' he added. He had not known my father Charu C. Chaudhuri personally, it turned out. But he located the family all right. He had read the autobiography of my uncle, Nirad C. Chaudhuri. He then mentioned an episode narrated in that book, in which a visit by the Inspector of Schools, a Mr Stapleton, to an East Bengal village is described. Professor Oaten has a really sharp memory, I thought. We had more proof of that soon.

We brought out our camera and the tape recorder. He smiled and said: 'You have a lot of gadgets in there, I see.' We had a request. We wanted him to read aloud the poem – a sonnet – he had written on Subhas Chandra Bose after hearing of his death in August 1945. But reading was difficult for him. His eyesight had deteriorated badly in old age. 'Let me see if I can remember it,' he said. He muttered the poem to himself a couple of times and then was ready for the tape recorder. He recited it in a clear, resonant voice.

He then presented us with a volume of his poems, *Songs of Aton*. Apart from the poem on Subhas Chandra Bose, there was one on Toru Dutt, the late nineteenth-century poetess of Bengal who wrote in both English and French, and another on Sarojini Naidu. But the poem that impressed us the most was another sonnet: 'India 1947'. In it he had lamented the partition of India and that Emperor Akbar's idea of Hindustan was no more. The poem read:

But this remember, as your India flies  
In twain, or more than twain, and bigots wade  
In blood to their uncharted lawless bourn,  
History will say you chose the lesser role,  
And broke the land.



Subhash Chandra Bose.

Obit 1945.

Did I once suffer, Subhash, at your hand?  
Your patriot heart is still! I would forget!  
Let me recall but this, that while as yet  
The Raj that you once challenged is your land  
Was mighty; I came - like your camp planned  
To mount the skies, and storm is battle set  
The ramparts of High Heaven, to claim the debt  
Of freedom owed, a plan and made descent.  
High Heaven yielded, but in dignity.  
Like I came, you sped towards the sea.  
Your wings were melted from you by the sun,  
The genial patriot, fine, that brightly glowed  
In India's mighty heart, an ~~flame~~ <sup>flower</sup> and  
Fruit for the Army's thousand victories won.

E. Farley Oaten

Professor Oaten's sonnet to India's Netaji, written in his own hand. Professor Oaten composed the poem in 1945 in a state of grief, after he heard about Netaji's death following the air crash in Taipei on 18 August 1945.

We discussed the poem, the partition of India and naturally the struggle for Bangladesh for some time.

Mrs Oaten brought back the dog, which had been taken out of the room during the tape-recording. The dog settled down at its master's side, and we settled down to afternoon tea. Mrs Oaten poured the tea and passed around her home-made ginger cake and plum cake. She had made cheese sandwiches and vegetable



sandwiches. Some Indians she knew were vegetarian, so she was relieved we ate everything. Another gentleman, a neighbour and friend of the Oatens, joined us for tea. As we tucked in, Professor Oaten spoke animatedly to him about the 'many-sided talents' of Subhas. He recounted the story of how Subhas had aced the Indian Civil Service examination just to show that he could do so, and then coolly resigned from it in order to serve his country. He shook his head and said again and again: 'Subhas was a remarkable man, a remarkable man.'

In a way Professor Oaten was a remarkable man too, I thought. The 1916 incident was fresh in my mind, because Sisir and I had been reading in the archives of London's India Office Library for the past few days and we had gone through the 'Oaten File' among other documents. In January 1916, there was an altercation between Professor Oaten and some students, and the students complained to the principal that one of them had been manhandled by the young professor. There was a student strike at Presidency College for two days. A successful strike at Presidency College, a premier government institution, was big news. Principal James called the students and asked them to make up with the professor; quietly, he advised Oaten to do the same. There was an apparent reconciliation – everyone shook hands and agreed to forgive and forget. But the students were again upset when they were compelled to pay a fine by the College authorities for participating in the strike. Only those who pleaded poverty were exempted.

Soon after, on 15 February 1916, another incident took place. A professor was absent and his class was taken by a substitute teacher, who let the class off a few minutes ahead of time. The boys came out in the corridor and were noisy. Oaten, who was taking his own class in a nearby room, got annoyed. He came out and scolded the students. The students dispersed and Oaten was about to go back into his classroom when one of the boys called out loudly to another student. Possibly this was not deliberate, but Oaten thought it was.

What happened after that is a matter of controversy. The boy said he was grabbed by the neck by Oaten and called a rascal. Oaten said he only took the boy by the arm. The students became agitated and although they lodged a complaint with Principal James, they felt there was no hope of justice from a British principal. I read, however, in the India Office Library papers that the students had misjudged the principal. James was actually sympathetic towards their case.

Principal James asked the students to come to his room at 3 p.m. the same day to discuss the matter. But it was exactly at that time that a number of students took the matter into their own hands and assaulted Oaten. A common story is that he was pushed down the steep staircase of Presidency College. The official report is different. The professor had come down the stairs, and was standing near the



notice board on the ground floor when he was suddenly surrounded by a small group of students and beaten up. Another professor, Gilchrist, who was coming down the stairs at the time, saw the incident but the boys ran away before he could identify any of them. The assault lasted barely a minute, but the consequences were far-reaching.

The governing body of the college started an enquiry immediately. But the Bengal government announced another, high-powered, enquiry committee which eventually submitted its report signed by the following members – Ashutosh Mookerjee, W. W. Hornell (Director of Public Instruction), C. W. Peake, J. Mitchell, and Heramba Chandra Maitra of the City College. Principal James, meanwhile, fell out with a Mr Lyon, the member of the government in charge of education and, as a result, was suspended and later made to retire. But before his suspension, Principal James called Subhas Bose, who had admitted that he was 'an eyewitness' to the Oaten incident, to meet him.

This is how Netaji describes the meeting in his autobiography:

'To me he said – or rather snarled – in unforgettable words: "Bose, you are the most troublesome man in the college. I suspend you." I said, "Thank you" and went home.'

With all this on my mind, I listened in some wonder to Professor Oaten recite the sonnet on Netaji, and speak of him in the highest terms. He brought out a worn photograph of a history seminar at Presidency College. He and Principal Wordsworth, who succeeded James, were there surrounded by a number of students and colleagues. 'This was taken soon after the 1916 incident,' he told us. He chuckled and asked: 'Is it true that in India, in some of the films on Subhas, I have been shown as a fierce-looking man rushing towards the students to attack them?'

Mrs Oaten served a farewell round of sherry and then it was time to say goodbye. She got ready to drive us to the train station and Professor Oaten shook hands very warmly with Sisir and me at the garden gate. How to explain the old man's frank admiration of Subhas Chandra Bose, I wondered as we drove to the station. Was it some British sense of fair play and sportsman-like spirit? Was it his own individual magnanimity? Or was it something about Netaji himself that converted adversaries into admirers?

## Notes

*Krishna and Sisir Bose had this memorable meeting on 30 September 1971 with the man who, in a way, launched Subhas Chandra Bose's political career. Edward Farley Oaten passed away in April 1973. This article, originally drafted by Krishna Bose in late 1971, has been slightly edited for this publication by Sumantra Bose. Ed.*



## NETAJI'S LAST JOURNEY: THE TAIPEI TRAGEDY

When you enter the museum at Kolkata's Netaji Bhawan, 38/2 Elgin Road, the first exhibit is a page from a diary. In it, Janakinath Bose records that his wife Prabhathi gave birth, on 23 January 1897, to a son, Subhas Chandra. The baby born in Cuttack (Odisha) that day was destined to become a world traveller. He spent his childhood in Cuttack and adolescence in Calcutta, then went to England to study at the University of Cambridge. Jailed in Mandalay, Burma from 1924 to 1927, he spent a lot of time during the 1930s in enforced exile in Europe. Bose became intimately familiar with Europe and many of its cities: Vienna, Prague, Rome, Berlin, Dublin and London. In February 1943, he boarded a submarine in Kiel in northern Germany and travelled underwater for over ninety-three days to East Asia. During the next two years, he was in Singapore, Malaya, Burma, Thailand, Japan and China. The globetrotter's final port of call in August 1945 was Taipei, the capital of Taiwan, then known as Formosa.

Taipei first came to my attention in 1957, when I read a book (published in 1956) called *The Gallant End of Netaji*. This was shortly after my marriage to Sisir Kumar Bose, son of Netaji's older brother Sarat Chandra Bose. The book's author was Harin Shah, a journalist. In 1946, Mr Shah visited Taipei to ascertain the facts about the airplane crash of 18 August 1945. The book was based on that investigation and described Netaji's last hours in great detail. It was a distressing read.

Sisir was already familiar with Harin Shah's account. After returning from Taiwan, Shah spoke to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Sardar Patel asked him to speak to Sarat Bose, who was Subhas's closest political ally and lifelong confidant. In November 1948, Harin Shah was posted as press attache in the Indian embassy in Prague when Sarat Bose visited the city during an extensive tour of Europe. Shah decided to take this opportunity to speak to him. Sisir, who was accompanying his father, was asked by Sarat to be present in the hotel room when Shah came over and briefed them about his inquiries and findings in Taiwan two years earlier. Sarat, who loved Subhas dearly all his life, heard Mr Shah out and was very distressed by the account. Sisir's autobiography of his childhood and youth, *Subhas and Sarat: An Intimate Memoir of the Bose Brothers*, published posthumously in its English version in 2016, describes this meeting in Czechoslovakia's capital.

In 1965, Sisir – with whom Netaji plotted his 1941 escape from the Elgin Road house and who drove him on the escape's first leg to the Gomoh railhead in Bihar (now in Jharkhand) – visited Taiwan himself. In the meantime, Sisir, a paediatrician by profession, had founded the Netaji Research Bureau at the house (Netaji



Bhawan] in 1957 to document all chapters and aspects of his uncle's extraordinary life. Sisir first went to Japan, where he met most of the Japanese political and military figures who had come into contact with Netaji during 1943-45 and been involved in some way with the Azad Hind movement and the Indian National Army. He stopped over in Taiwan on his way back to India. When he returned to Calcutta via Bangkok, we stayed up all night as I listened to him recount his time in Taipei.

Sisir had wandered around freely and taken many photographs in the premises of the old airport where the crash took place on 18 August 1945, as well as the nearby hospital where Netaji breathed his last and the crematorium where his funeral rites were performed. He also visited the Taiwanese foreign ministry. He was told there that the crash took place when the Japanese were still in effective control of the island (Formosa), during a chaotic period three days after Japan's surrender to the Allies. The present [1965] government of Taiwan had been established only in 1949, when the remnants of Chiang Kai-Shek's Kuomintang regime fled there from mainland China upon being defeated by Mao's Chinese Communist Party [CCP] forces. So, they did not have any documentary record of the crash. The Taiwan authorities gave the Mukherjee commission, the third to inquire into Netaji's fate, the same formal response nearly four decades later. On the basis of that response, this commission reported that no plane crash had happened at the Taihoku (Taipei) airfield on 18 August 1945.



Sisir Bose, back to camera, in front of the former Japanese military hospital in Taipei where Netaji passed away in the evening of 18 August 1945. The photograph is from a visit Sisir made to Taipei in 1965.

My chance to visit Taipei came in 1979. By that time, the Khosla commission of inquiry [1970] into Netaji's fate had completed its work and, like the earlier Shah Nawaz commission [1956], confirmed the veracity of Netaji's death in the plane



crash on the basis of the convincing and consistent testimonies of the crash's survivors and of the many eyewitnesses to its immediate aftermath. It had reiterated the recommendation of the first commission that the late leader's ashes be brought back to India with due honour from Tokyo's Renkoji temple, where the remains have been preserved since September 1945.

Sisir and I travelled first to Japan in 1979 and one day we met at the Renkoji shrine with many of Netaji's old Japanese associates and close acquaintances, in the presence of its chief priest, Rev. Mochizuki (junior, son of the priest who had been in charge in 1945). Generals Fujiwara, Isoda, Arisue and Katakura were present, among others. I already knew most of them because they had come to Calcutta in the 1960s and 1970s to attend conferences at the Netaji Research Bureau. General Katakura, a bluntly spoken man, expressed astonishment that the ashes had not been taken back to India thirty-four years after Bose's demise and were still lying in the Renkoji temple, which was intended to be a temporary resting place.



Sisir and Krishna Bose in 1979 at the Renkoji Temple in Tokyo, Japan, where Netaji's mortal remains have been preserved since September 1945

In Kyoto, we met with the family of General Shidei, who was one of Netaji's co-passengers on the plane and was killed instantly when it crashed. They showed us the general's military record. It said: 'Date of death: August 18, 1945. Place of death: Taihoku airfield. Cause of death: Death by war'.

Our main host in Japan was General Fujiwara Iwaichi (1908– 1986). As a major in Japanese military intelligence, he had been intimately involved with the INA since its formation in Singapore in 1942. He retired from active service in the mid-1960s as a lieutenant general in the Japan Self-Defence Forces, established after World



War II. Fujiwara, who visited us many times in Calcutta, starting in 1967, remained a friend of India all his life. When he died in 1986, a telegram from his family reached us in Calcutta: 'Fujiwara returned to Hindustan forever'.

On our 1979 trip to Japan, the plane had actually had a stopover in Taipei. But we were uncertain whether we would be able to visit Taipei during our return journey because India, like most countries, did not have full diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Fujiwara, ever resourceful, arranged Taiwan visas for us in Tokyo. He also informed a friend of his in Taiwan, a business tycoon, about our impending arrival. This gentleman became our host in Taipei and his staff acted as our guides.





General Fujiwara Iwaichi of Japan presents Netaji's samurai sword, given to Netaji in Tokyo in November 1943, to Dr Sisir Bose at Netaji Bhawan, Calcutta, 1967.

Sisir and I landed at Taipei's Chiang Kai-Shek International Airport and checked into the city's Grand Hotel. There was much excitement going on because Elizabeth Taylor was visiting Taiwan. From the window of our hotel room, I spotted an airport; planes were landing and taking off. We were told that this was the old



Taipei/Taihoku airport, which was now used for domestic flights.

The morning after a formal welcome banquet – with the typical dozen courses – attended by various state officials, the tycoon, Mr Oo, drove us personally to the domestic airport. Sisir remarked that the terminal had been modernized and expanded since his 1965 visit. Mr Oo took us along a corridor to a point with an unrestricted view of the runway, framed by hills at some distance. He said the runway had been widened a bit but was otherwise the same as in 1945.

Standing there, I was reminded of Col. Habib-ur Rahman's account of what had happened there on the afternoon of 18 August 1945. As Netaji's aide-de-camp, the INA colonel had been his only Indian companion on the plane. Originally from the Bhimber district of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir (presently part of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir), he died in Pakistan in 1978.

Netaji and Col. Rahman ate bananas and sandwiches sitting under an awning on the tarmac during the refuelling stop in Taipei. They had boarded in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) on 17 August, stopped overnight in Danang in central Vietnam – a port city then known by its French name, Touraine – and the plane was headed next for Manchuria. Habib was feeling a little cold and he asked if Netaji would like to put on a sweater; Netaji said no. Habib put on a sweater standing by the plane.

As soon as the plane took off, Habib heard a loud sound like an explosion, and one of the plane's twin propellers (the one on the left side) detached and fell off. The plane crashed to the ground and fire immediately engulfed its front section.





Netaji's last known photograph – disembarking at Saigon airport on 17 August 1945

Habib looked towards the rear exit and saw that it was completely blocked by fallen baggage. He said: '*Netaji, aage se nikliye; pichhe rasta nahin hai.*' [Netaji, go out from the front; there is no exit from the back.]

Bose promptly walked out of the front exit through the flames. The plane was a converted Japanese bomber, and everyone was seated on the floor. As fate would have it, Netaji had been sitting next to the aircraft's petrol tank, and fuel had spilled on the military uniform he was wearing from the impact of the crash. Rahman followed Netaji out of the plane and was aghast to see his tight-fitting uniform ablaze. Rahman rushed to him and started to tug at the belt in order to undo the uniform. In the process, Rahman sustained burn injuries on his hands. He managed to lay Netaji on the ground and, overcome by his own injuries, collapsed beside his



leader.

Netaji said to him calmly, in a tone of concern: '*Aapko zada to nahin lagi?*' [I hope you are not badly hurt?] Then, as they lay side by side, Netaji said to Habib in an equally calm tone: '*Jab aap mulk wapas jaye, mulki bhaiyon ko batana ki hum aakhri dum tak azaadi ki liye larte rahen, woh jung-e-azaadi zaari rakhen. Hindustan azaad hoga; usko koi ghulam nahin rakh sakta.*' [When you go back to the homeland, tell the countrymen that I fought for freedom till my last breath, and they must continue the war for freedom. India will be free; no one can keep it enslaved any more.]

Standing there overlooking the runway, I thought: Somewhere over there Subhas Chandra Bose and Habib-ur Rahman lay side by side on 18 August 1945.

Next, we set out to look for the hospital where the casualties were brought. At that time (1945), this Japanese military hospital was known locally as the 'Nan-moon' hospital and also as the 'South Gate' hospital. Our guides said that the present (1979) hospital on the same site is referred to as the University Hospital and also as the Peace Hospital. I was rather disappointed when I saw a large, modern building. It bore no resemblance to the photographs I had seen of a low-slung single-storeyed structure, much like a barracks, which Sisir had visited in 1965.

But then, we spotted that old structure in a field to the rear of the new building! It was exactly the same, its long front veranda framed by arches. The central archway was the Emergency entrance and led into the Emergency ward. There were a few other rooms. The Peace Hospital's deputy director, a woman, took us around. She said that the old structure would be demolished soon to build a new, modern facility as part of the hospital's enlargement plans.

On 18 August 1945, the casualties were treated by Dr Yoshimi Taneyoshi, assisted by Dr Tsuruta. Yoshimi was later detained by the British. He repeated the testimony he gave them to the Shah Nawaz and Khosla commissions. He and Tsuruta bandaged Netaji's burns and gave the patient injections of vita-camphor and digi-tamine. Shortly afterwards, a gentleman called Juichi Nakamura arrived at the hospital. Nakamura knew Netaji well, having acted as his interpreter during four stopovers Netaji made in Formosa in 1943 and 1944 while flying from Singapore or Rangoon to Tokyo.

According to Nakamura, Netaji spoke four times in the hospital, and he translated each time. In the evening, his condition deteriorated. When he passed away, those present at the bedside were the two doctors, two nurses, Nakamura, a ward boy named Mitsui, and Habib-ur Rahman.

Everyone felt shattered. Colonel Habib, extremely distraught, went down on his knees by the bed and prayed for the departed soul. According to Dr Yoshimi, he issued a standard death certificate, written in Japanese. He wrote the deceased's



name as 'Chandra Bose', as Netaji was widely referred to by the Japanese. The cause of death: 'third-degree burns'. This Japanese death certificate has not been recovered.

Mr Oo accompanied us to search for the crematorium where the last rites took place. Sisir had located this crematorium easily in 1965 – he recalled it lay at the end of Sun Yat-sen Avenue. It was still in use then. In 1946, Harin Shah spoke to one Chu Tsang, a worker at the old crematorium, who said that he had been present at the cremation ceremony of a very famous Indian leader the previous year. But now a new crematorium had come up, which our local friends were familiar with. We found the site of the old crematorium occupied by a new-looking gasoline station (petrol pump). Its employees confirmed that the old crematorium, now demolished, had stood there.

We then went looking for the Nishi Honganji shrine, where the urn containing Netaji's mortal remains was brought from the crematorium and kept before being transferred to Tokyo in September 1945. A prayer meeting also took place there during that time. Sisir had visited this temple, too, in 1965.

When we arrived at the site, we saw a number of steps leading up to a raised platform, the shrine's base. The wooden temple had burned down in a fire. We were told it would be rebuilt. When the urn containing Netaji's remains was brought there by Nakamura and Habib, an urn containing General Shidei's remains – he had been killed instantly in the crash – was already there. Nakamura told the temple's priest that the urn they had brought contained the remains of a person much more important than the Japanese general. The priest then brought an object similar to a high stool and placed the urn on it, at a higher level than Shidei's urn. Nakamura asked the priest to place fresh flowers daily in front of Netaji's urn.

Our new Taiwanese friends – Mr Oo and his young, English-speaking staff members Christine Lee and Roger Koo – came to see us off at Chiang Kai-Shek International Airport. We travelled to Singapore and Malaysia, and then Thailand, before returning to India. They said they sincerely hoped we had had a nice stay in their country. I did not have the heart to tell such wonderful hosts that I was actually feeling very sad.

I thought at the time that this was my first and last visit to the place where Netaji's life journey was so tragically cut short. I was wrong. My connection to Taiwan revived two decades later, during my three terms in the Lok Sabha.

From 1999 to 2004, I was the chairperson of the parliamentary standing committee on external affairs. In that capacity, I met regularly with ambassadors of various countries in New Delhi. Taiwan of course did not have an embassy; that is an absolute no-no if India, or any other country, wishes to have diplomatic ties with the



People's Republic of China (PRC). However, Taiwan did have an economic and cultural office, a de facto mission, in New Delhi. Joseph Chen, the head of that office, made courtesy calls on me, because my position had Minister of State (MoS) rank.

Then, in the summer of 2002, I received an invitation to speak at a conference on 'Democracy in the Asia-Pacific' to be held in Taipei in August 2002. By that time, Taiwan had evolved remarkably from its authoritarian Kuomintang origins into a democracy. But it was a somewhat sensitive matter because my attendance could attract an official protest from the PRC's foreign ministry – in the event it did not – to our ministry of external affairs (MEA). After consulting the MEA, I decided to go.

My older son, Sugata, was in India on his summer break from his academic job in the United States and he travelled with me, at his own expense, so I would not have to travel alone. My two sons, Sugata and the much younger Sumantra, had become rather protective of me since Sisir's death in autumn 2000.

On arrival in Taipei, we checked into the same Grand Hotel where Sisir and I had stayed in 1979. While I attended the conference, Sugata visited the domestic airport and the site of the old hospital. He also visited the rebuilt Nishi Honganji shrine, in a congested locality close to the hospital site. As in 1979, I could see planes taking off from and landing at the domestic airport from the window of my hotel room. I went to the domestic airport once during this visit.

After Taipei, we travelled to Japan. There I met in a formal session with the chairpersons of the foreign affairs committees of the lower and upper houses of the Japanese parliament, the *Diet*. A dinner hosted by the Indian embassy in Tokyo was attended among others by Rev. Mochizuki (Jr.), the priest of the Renkoji shrine, and his wife. Of course, we also went to the shrine one day to pay our respects. Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Atal Behari Vajpayee all visited Renkoji as prime ministers during official visits to Japan to pay homage to Netaji's memory. Vajpayeeji, whom I remember often and with great regard, visited Renkoji for the first time as minister of external affairs in the late 1970s. *[In September 2014, Narendra Modi made his first visit to Japan as prime minister. Shortly before the visit, Krishna Bose wrote to him in her capacity of Chairperson of Netaji Research Bureau. In the letter, she requested him to visit the Renkoji shrine to pay his respects, and pointed out that every previous prime minister of India had done so during official visits to Japan – with one exception, Manmohan Singh. Mr Modi did not send an acknowledgement of Krishna Bose's letter, and he has not visited the Renkoji shrine to pay homage to Netaji though he has made official trips to Japan a number of times between 2014 and 2022. Ed.]*

Three years later, in autumn 2005, I received another invitation to speak at a conference on democracy and democratization in Taipei. By that time, I was no longer



an MP. Sugata, in Boston, and Sumantra, in London, were both against my undertaking the fairly long journey alone. But Taipei had such a pull on me that I disregarded their objections. I left Kolkata on the night of *Ashtami*, the peak of Bengal's Durga Puja. When I arrived in Taipei after stopovers in Bangkok and Hong Kong, I was received at the door of the plane and escorted through the diplomatic channel. On my third visit to Taipei, I was taken not to the Grand Hotel, but to the city's Holiday Inn, where the conference was to take place. Vijay Gokhale, our representative in Taiwan – he's now our ambassador in Beijing – called on me there soon after I checked in. [*Mr Gokhale subsequently became India's foreign secretary. Ed.*]

The conference was inaugurated by Annette Lu, Taiwan's vice president. At its formal banquet, I found myself seated next to Chen Shui-bian, Taiwan's president. We could not converse much because his English was limited, but he was very warm. Both he and Annette were from the Democratic Progressive Party, which had after a long struggle ended the Kuomintang's one-party dominance of Taiwan's politics.

Once the conference got over, I went again to the domestic airport, and to the site of the hospital, by then known in its twenty-first-century avatar as the Hoping Hospital. I also went to see the Nishi Honganji shrine, and found that it had been temporarily moved as that congested locality was being spruced up.

But, to my surprise and delight, I found the Railway Hotel, where Netaji stayed four times in 1943 and 1944 during stopovers in Taipei on flights from Singapore or Rangoon to Tokyo. Juichi Nakamura, the interpreter who was a tragic eyewitness to Netaji's demise in 1945, met him on each of those occasions and dined with him at the Railway Hotel. An elegant building of colonial-style architecture, it was unused and dilapidated at the time of my visit in October 2005.

My Taiwanese guides were curious to know what had happened to the so-called 'treasure' Netaji and Habib were carrying – mainly jewellery donated to the Azad Hind movement by Indian and Indian-origin women in Southeast Asia. I told them that the Shah Nawaz and Khosla commissions had been shown those items, burnt almost black by the fire from the plane crash, from the collection of the National Museum in New Delhi, then situated in Rashtrapati Bhavan. Apart from the jewellery, Netaji's faithful valet, Kundan Singh, identified several personal items belonging to Netaji which were recovered from the crash site: a gold *supari* container, a gold cigarette case (a gift from Ribbentrop, the German foreign minister), a cigarette lighter and a nail-clipper.

According to Juichi Nakamura, Subhas Chandra Bose spoke four times before passing away at the hospital in Taipei. The first time, he said that several top INA officers and other close associates were due to follow him from Saigon. This was



quite correct; his mind was clearly functioning still, despite his horrific injuries. He asked that they be looked after once they arrived. The second time he spoke, he asked after General Shidei, his co-passenger (who was already dead). The third time, he said that his head was throbbing unbearably. The fourth and last time, he simply said, in English: 'I want to sleep.'

As he fell asleep, Habib-ur Rahman sank in prayer by the bed and Yoshimi, Nakamura and the other Japanese stood chanting Buddhist mantras.

In the summer of 2017, sixty years after I first learned about Taipei and Netaji's heart-breaking death there from Harin Shah's book, the calling bell rang in our apartment in New Delhi. The visitor was Dr Shekhar Shah, director-general of the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and the younger of two sons of Harin Shah. He had come to see us accompanied by his charming half-Bengali wife, Malati. Shekhar got in touch on e-mail with Sumantra – coincidentally both he and Sumantra earned PhDs from Columbia University in New York, but two decades apart, in the late 1970s and late 1990s respectively – after reading Sisir's memoir *Subhas and Sarat*, published in English in 2016, which towards its end recounts Harin Shah's meeting with Sarat Bose and Sisir in Prague's Alcron Hotel in November 1948. While Harin Shah was posted in Prague as the press attache in our embassy there in the late 1940s and early 1950s, his wife completed a PhD in sociology at its famed Charles University under the supervision of Professor Vincenc Lesny, the director of its Oriental Institute and a friend of Netaji's from the 1930s. She also gave birth to Shekhar's older brother in Prague. *[In November 2019, Sumantra Bose visited Prague – for the first time since June 1990, when he had gone there while an undergraduate student in the United States, a few months after the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia and across Eastern and Central Europe. Sumantra spoke at an academic conference at the Oriental Institute in November 2019, and stayed at the Alcron Hotel in central Prague, where Sarat and Sisir had stayed in November 1948. The Alcron is still housed in its original art deco building of the early 1930s, and is now a Radisson Blu hotel. Krishna Bose was happy about the renewed connection with the Oriental Institute, with which Netaji had been associated in the 1930s and where she and Sisir had spoken at a conference on Netaji in 1971. Ed.]*

My sixty-year journey of coming to terms with Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's martyrdom in the cause of India's freedom had come full circle.

In 1916, Subhas was expelled from Calcutta's Presidency College for allegedly assaulting a professor after a dispute over the latter's arrogant behaviour. In 1971, Sisir and I spent an autumn day with that professor, Edward Farley Oaten, and his wife at their home in Walton-on-Thames, a town just south of London. Professor Oaten gifted us a book of his poems – he was an accomplished poet. It included a



sonnet he had written twenty-five years earlier, in a state of grief, after hearing about Subhas's passing. Then eighty-seven, and almost blind, he had difficulty reading but recited the poem faultlessly from memory for my tape recorder. In it, he likened Subhas to Icarus, the figure of Greek mythology who perished after flying too close to the sun:

*Did I once suffer, Subhas, at your hand?  
Your patriot heart is stilled! I would forget!  
Let me recall but this, that while as yet  
The Raj that you once challenged in your land  
Was mighty; Icarus-like your courage planned  
To mount the skies, and storm in battle set  
The ramparts of High Heaven, to claim the debt  
Of freedom owed, on plain and rude demand.  
High Heaven yielded, but in dignity.  
Like Icarus, you sped towards the sea.  
Your wings were melted from you by the sun,  
The genial patriot fire, that brightly glowed  
In India's mighty heart, and flamed and flowed  
Forth from her Army's thousand victories won.*

## **Notes**

*This is a slightly abridged version of an article by Krishna Bose published in the Bengali magazine Desh as its cover-story in August 2017, in commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of India's independence and the seventy-second anniversary of the martyrdom of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. The article has been translated into English by Sumantra Bose. Ed.*



## About the Author

Krishna Bose (1930–2020) was a Member of Parliament for three terms, elected to the Lok Sabha from West Bengal. From 1999 to 2004, she chaired the parliamentary standing committee on external affairs. In her professional life, she was a professor of English Literature. In December 1955, Krishna (nee Chaudhuri) married Dr Sisir Kumar Bose (1920–2000), the son of Netaji's older brother and lifelong confidant Sarat Chandra Bose. Aged twenty, Sisir was Netaji's chief aide in his daring escape from India in 1941 and drove the escape-car from the family's mansion on Kolkata's Elgin Road. Krishna helped Sisir build the Netaji Research Bureau at Netaji Bhawan from 1957 onwards. After Sisir's death, she served as NRB chairperson for twenty years, until her death in 2020.





First published in English 2022 by Picador India

This electronic edition published 2022 by Picador India  
an imprint of Pan Macmillan Publishing India Private Limited

707 Kailash Building  
26 K. G. Marg, New Delhi 110001

[www.panmacmillan.co.in](http://www.panmacmillan.co.in)

Pan Macmillan, The Smithson, 6 Brisset Street, London EC1M 5NR

*EU representative:* Macmillan Publishers Ireland Ltd, 1st Floor,  
The Liffey Trust Centre, 117–126 Sheriff Street Upper,  
Dublin 1, D01 YC43

Associated companies throughout the world

[www.panmacmillan.com](http://www.panmacmillan.com)

ISBN 978-9-3907-4219-6

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Cover Design Credit: Devangana Dash

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